

Retreat

Jasmine Neosh

“I always try to picture you in my writing workshops, doing the exercises. You know, describing yourself to us as a color, an animal, a fabric.”

“Can you picture it?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Good.”

I'd been staying at Jack's house for three straight weeks and this was probably the most I'd got out of him. The agreement we'd had in the beginning was that I needed to unwind after the semester and get some writing done, so in exchange for some minor chore work, I could sleep on his couch and he would help me with all that he could. He called it Boot Camp. He didn't seem worried about what people would think of a woman in her early twenties staying at his house, so I wasn't either. I couldn't focus on anything in my own apartment because of my roommates' nearly constant mating, and besides that, what better opportunity to improve than to write under the watchful eye of a man so brilliant? He promised it was going to be fun. He said he had high hopes for me. But after three weeks, I hadn't learned a damn thing. During the day, he spent most of his time searching the Internet for random facts and pornography, and at night, he watched crime TV and drank alone.

Jack's house was in a constant state of disarray. Once while attempting to clean, I found a bulky video camera from the eighties and asked if I could have it to document the time I spent at his house. He shrugged and grunted, which meant yes.

The video camera was just an excuse to ask him questions. They started out as meaningful questions about craft and diligence, but he rarely answered these except in metaphors. Eventually it just became a way to remind him of my presence. He shifted uncomfortably under the stare of the lens and kept his eyes on the television when I shoved it in his face, but he didn't try to take it from me.

“So, Mr. Hotshot Author,” I said. “What kind of fabric would you be?”

“That's a stupid question,” he said without even looking up. Then, after a pause, “Snakeskin.”

“I said velvet.”

“Why velvet?” No eye contact.

“Because I show fluids easily.”

“But velvet sucks,” he said. “I mean, it's pretty but it's weak. You can see all the wrinkles and flaws just looking at it. Do you really want to write like that? Now cut that out, I'm trying to watch this.”

I wanted to ask more questions: questions about art, about purity, about how to be great. He turned up the volume so loud I could barely think. I sighed, got up and left. I made a list of all the fabrics I would rather be than velvet and left it on his refrigerator.

onion skin (not paper, real onion skin)

tree bark

razor wire

orange peels

rusty steel mesh from a screen door

'50s tampon material

wet paper

tack board

recycled toilet paper

human skin

condoms

When he came in to get another beer, he read it, looked at me sitting at his table, and then read it again. I was waiting for him to react, but like always, he said nothing. He just took a marker from his junk drawer and made a note beside my note, as if issuing me a grade. I waited for him to leave before reading it:

“Tree bark isn't a fabric.”

Just as he had every other night that I stayed there, he drank himself to sleep and I walked through the lonely house turning off lights. When I came back to the front room, I saw the abandoned video recorder lying on the sofa. I turned it on and stood above him for uncountable minutes, watching him breathe and sleep in the tiny screen. When he shifted onto his side, I put it down and sidled up to him on the couch so that I could put my arms around his back. I sat that way for a long time, wondering a lot of things about the man who slept peacefully in my arms, who didn't wonder anything about me.