

TO MAR A PAGE WITH WORDS

The blank page didn't make a move, but it seemed to want to say to him, Did you think it would be so easy after years of neglect?

He'd tried writing on the computer, but the Internet proved a distraction. He tried unplugging it, but he always just plugged it back in. The blank page represented Robert's latest attempt – writing with a pencil at the library. Mostly he browsed the shelves.

In the end he packed it all up and went home. Did he hate himself more for accomplishing nothing, or for thinking he could have done better? Even his computer pages remained stark white, having typed a few words but deleted all of them in their turn.

He lay awake in bed for hours, but none of his thoughts could really be termed ideas. Fuck. He had work in the morning.

Morning found him running on a few hours of sleep. Cup after cup of tea enabled his shift at the bank. When had he started relying on caffeine anyway?

He went home and stared at the page again. Hypnotically, for hours. The need to create felt more a lash than a guiding light. Robert had gone to college for English but had never finished. Crawling up from the trap of manual labor, he had worked for the last.... was it eight years already?... at the bank. A quarter of his life. He considered writing the words "Eight Years" across the top of the page in bold letters, just to put something there. It's not that he had no ideas. Just none seemed good enough to broach the silence of the page.

Finally the headache drove him to bed. A voice in his head asked, "Is this even writers' block or am I just too afraid to write something down?"

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He opened his eyes. Colors danced along the walls, almost like what happens when a car drives past on the street. Robert sat up, afraid to look to the window, but slowly he did.

Clouds of colors swirled just beyond the windowpane. He stood up and went to them. As though the glass was not there, he stepped up and past, out into the gently churning fog. He walked until his house disappeared into the swirl behind him, and soon discovered that if he leaned just right, an updraft would catch and lift him. Laughing, relaxing back into it, he let the fog carry him where it wished.

Red mists became red sheets. Gray mists became the blocks of the wall. A dark haired woman sat on the bed, legs tucked neatly under her to the side. She patted the bed next to her and Robert sat as beckoned. She had a blank sheet of paper in her hands.

She leaned forward and there seemed to only be her eyes, her lips. No bed, no room. And then the sound of her voice, “Is it such a bad thing?”

“It used to be all I ever wanted,” he said. To write, or at least to create in some way.

“And then you wanted nothing.”

“I just want to want again,” he whispered.

“A blank page,” she breathed into his ear. “Infinite possibility.”

“Yes?” he sighed.

Warm hands caressed his back, pressed the muscles. “A white page.” She kissed his cheek. “Light unmarred by form, uncontainable.” Teeth softly tugged his earlobe. “It’s not a failing of yours that you can’t despoil the beauty. To mar the page with words.”

“Encroach on the silence...” he mumbled, trying to remember the words he had thought earlier in the night. That was a good phrase, he should use it somewhere. The pure, meditative space of the page.

“Fuck silence,” she said.

Robert noticed someone watching from a corner in the room.

He woke, sweaty and erect.

**

The day after the dream he wrote a poem he called “To Mar a Page with Words.” He had never written poetry, except for a class in high school. Though he tried never to touch the stuff, he had to admit he was pretty proud of this one.

A few weeks later a magazine accepted it. The day he got the acceptance email he had a glass of champagne alone at his coffee table. He hadn’t really written anything but notes since the poem, and he went through those now. The poem seemed to break the seal, so to speak, and he crowded words onto paper. He got one of those little notebooks and kept it in his pocket so he could jot down ideas wherever he went.

In the author’s note – really just one paragraph of his allowed two-paragraph bio – he mentioned the half-remembered dream as his inspiration. He called the woman his dream muse.

He had dreamt her before, a decade and a half ago. The perfect woman of his pubescent dreams. He hadn’t thought about her since high school, but neither had he dated anyone since then.

In bed, exhausted but too invigorated to sleep, he thought about the dream woman. The thought had him digging out an old soiled t-shirt. Her words, “Fuck silence,” became, “Fuck me.” She leaned in to whisper the words into his ear, but now she leaned back for him. She wore a red dress. No, no, she wore nothing at all. Finish up, go to sleep. Work in the morning. He pumped his fist, trying to build the perfect scene in his mind.

Before long his strokes came slower and slower. His eyes, squinched tight, relaxed. Slipping into dream, his bed became her bed.

She lay on her side on red satin sheets. Mounds of pillows – reds, oranges, and the golden and brown colors of spices – surrounded them in textures of silk, velvet, and even corduroy. The bed formed a solitary island in a sea of swirling mists.

“You published my words,” she said.

“I did,” he said, face flushing. “I attributed it to you...”

“You marred the page with my words,” she said, delicate eyebrow arched.

“I’m sorry.”

She pushed him onto his back and rested on her arms, hovering over him. “Words weaken the page, do you understand? It’s the white space, the places between the words, that have the real power. Do you understand?”

He shook his head. Leaning like this, her dress sagged. He lifted his head a bit.

“How important is this to you? To write?”

“I’d give almost anything.”

“Then I suppose you must. But if you must, then your writing must be full of possibility and hope. Your words must liberate the human imagination! Not direct it down any path.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about –”

Her lips stopped his in a kiss. Warm and soft, her tongue pushed into him.

“Am I your dream muse?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he breathed. Dream muse. It occurred to him that this might be a dream.

Something about the air seemed to grow sharper, like he had cleared the sleep from his eyes. She seemed more solid, hovering above him. He saw, now, something wild in her eyes.

She grabbed him in a hug, crushing her breasts against his chest. “Let me be your Beatrice,” she said, starting to rock. “Let me be your Diotima.”

“My muse,” he whispered into her ear. He brushed her dark hair away from her ear so he could kiss it. He started to pull the dress over her head.

She covered her breasts with her hands. “Do you need me?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, gently taking her hands. They held firm. “Do you trust me?” she asked.

“You are my muse,” he said.

She allowed him to guide her hands down to her sides. She knelt over him still as a statue. He trailed a finger through the sweat between her breasts, down the concave lines of her belly.

“You must be a prolific writer, never lingering on any one thing.” His erection rose up to meet her, rubbed against her. She seemed like a figure of doom looking down on him. Only her chest moved, rising and falling with her breath

“Why?”

She took him in her hand and lowered herself onto him. Laying across him, her hair covered his face and chest. “Innocence is your gift. It has made you dear to me.” She kissed his neck just below his jaw. “Don’t give it away. Don’t mar it.”

She sucked on that spot and began to move up and down on him.

“Let me be your dream muse,” she moaned.

“Yes,” he said. “Please, yes.” He grabbed her hips and moved with her.

She pressed her lips onto his, her tongue swirling feverishly against his. Her lips surrounded his, soft and wet. He pushed into her, harder and faster. He wondered how the dream could still be going on. A sex dream always ended as soon as the heart got pumping.

Embracing her and scooping her up, he set her on her back without pulling out. God, she felt so real. He kissed between her breasts, licked at her nipple. It stiffened against his tongue.

“Love me, please love me,” she mouthed. “Am I your dream muse?” she asked aloud.

He drove into her. “Yes.”

“Am I your muse?” she demanded, louder, pulling him in closer.

“Always,” he said. His forearms, pressed against her sides, seemed to become one with her. As he pulled back and forth, his hips stayed connected with hers, stretching like elastic between them.

“Come closer,” she said, drawing him in. Her hands seemed to sink into his back. An electric tingle filled him wherever she touched. His hips sank completely into hers. All thrusting stopped. The tingling rose toward spasm.

He felt another presence watching, but could not see anyone else with them. He looked around the room. In the previous dream there had been someone else with them.

“Come back to me,” she said. He still searched the room, head darting around. “Come back, please come back,” she said, pawing at his head with her hands. He let her pull his gaze back to her. He saw a dead face and leapt back.

That image stayed with him as he opened his eyes in bed, then opened the curtains to let more sunlight in.

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He continued to write, more than he ever thought possible. Fantasy stories, crime stories. Fuck, even a Western. The dream muse’s words ran constantly through his mind. Never linger on any one thing.

Hadn’t he always done that? Changing majors; dropping out. Losing and gaining friends till finally he had none. Working at the bank was his only constant. But it made sense. The dream

woman's words could only have come from within him. Don't mar the page. Don't fuck it up. Don't try because you might fail.

She started to come to him once a week. He was finishing about one story a week, including editing, and writing down enough ideas to keep him the next several months. He created a spreadsheet of the publications he sent them to. He began to write down their erotic escapades. He never submitted them anywhere; they felt a bit too fever dream to publish. Maybe one day he'd fictionalize it and publish it as a collection.

If he had ever been published in his previous writing days he probably would never have stopped. The feeling was addictive. Please God don't let me get used to it.

He found that if he stayed up he could easily fall asleep masturbating. If he did that, he could almost guarantee a dream of the muse. He always knew he was dreaming as soon as he saw her, but she still felt solid and separate. He couldn't make her do whatever he wished. If she had been a mere ventriloquist dummy, she couldn't have given him such invaluable ideas. Ironic that she, herself, always seemed to discourage writing, or action of any kind, really.

He developed a nice set of bags under his eyes from staying awake. His supervisor commented on it, and even asked about his lifestyle and late nights, or sometimes "hard nights." After that he stopped staying up late in order to fall asleep during masturbation, but still the dreams became more frequent. He no longer got the sense of another presence. He was alone with his muse.

That thought carried into his waking life. It had been a while since he had thought about how alone he was, though he used to dwell on it incessantly. He was published now, several times in fact. Maybe now he was worthy of other people's company.

He took a few selfies and joined a dating site.

Later that night, the dark haired beauty hovered over him, tracing patterns on his forehead and cheek, the ends of her hair just brushing his face. “Every decision you make limits your future choices,” she said, her tone wistful. “If you choose A, you become the person who chose A. You can never be the chooser of B.”

“Are you an Existentialist?” he asked. “Does that mean I am too?”

She play-slapped him. “That’s what I mean by innocence,” she said.

“But if you make no decisions, then you lose all possibilities, right? Nothing’s really possible if you go nowhere.”

“The tragedy of the human condition,” she said. “There is nothing perfect in life.”

He looked up from her breasts to see her eyes, two cavernous empty sockets.

**

A lady agreed to meet Robert after chatting with him online for a week. The day of the big date he checked his email. A story had gotten rejected. Damn, it was a good one too. He thought it was a perfect fit for that magazine – he wrote it with them in mind.

A little deflated, he got dressed. Were guys still wearing suit jackets over t-shirts? Better go with solid long-sleeved, he decided.

They met at an expensive Italian place. He never spent any money, so his meager wages just accumulated. Why not splurge a little? She seemed really sweet.

She met him in the lobby in a dark blue stripey dress that came to mid-thigh. Blonde hair framed a heart shaped face that dimpled when she smiled. She wore a tiny silver five-pointed-star medallion on a delicate chain.

“Annabelle?” he asked.

“Robert?” she said, brightly.

“That’s me. Wow, I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, um, your head was at a different angle in your picture.” She wrinkled her brow.

Somehow the words, You’re even more beautiful than in your picture, didn’t want to come out.

He asked her about the star necklace over minestrone. “Are you Jewish?” he asked.

She laughed. “No...”

“I’m just kidding. A friend of mine wore a pentagram and she got asked that all the time.” Man, how long had it been since he had talked to her?

Over the salad course Annabelle told him about her career as a communications consultant. She had directed her career so that she always worked for organizations she really believed in. In the past that had meant environmental charities and homeless services. Currently it meant an animal protection activist group.

“I work at a bank,” he said.

“Do you like money?” she asked.

“I guess.”

He excused himself to the bathroom. Loath to spend a minute unoccupied, he checked the Internet on his phone. He saw a story about a man who worked at a popular magazine who had just had a car crash. The name seemed familiar. Robert quickly switched to his email. Shit. The guy who rejected his story.

He went back to Annabelle.

“You know, I find money fascinating,” she said. She had a determined look on her face. Determined to make this conversation go somewhere, he guessed. He hadn’t spoken much. “It’s

like blood. It flows around the economic system, enlivening it. If it pools in one place, or is absent in places, you're in trouble."

"My real passion is writing," he said.

"Oh?" She perked up. "Tell me more."

They timed their drinks, one per hour, so they'd be safe to drive home. "Have a glass of water with each drink," she suggested, to avoid hangovers. He likes crisp whites, while she favored stout reds.

"I don't really care about wine pairings," she said. "I just want tons of flavor."

They must have had four drinks by the time the evening drew to an end. She gave him a big hug and she politely kissed his cheek.

He sat down in his car and closed his eyes for a moment. So tired. Lately he hardly seemed to get any rest, though now that he abandoned the stay-awake trick he was sleeping more and more.

The sensation of being watched made his eyes pop open. He swiveled his head, examining the parking lot. No one visible watching. He checked the back seat for good measure. Shaking his head vigorously to wake up, he started the car.

On the highway his head kept nodding. He opened the window to get some cold air on his face and blasted the music. Just ten more minutes or so until home. He slapped himself on the cheek. "Wake up," he said to himself.

He got over to the right to take his exit in a mile. Maybe if he just closed his eyes for a second, counted to three, and then opened them again. He was so tired.

Warm arms draped around his neck and chest from the back seat. "Why would you settle?" she asked, lips against his ear.

“Fuck!” He swerved into the shoulder and just avoided the guard rail. The car screeched to a stop.

He jumped out of the car and looked into the back seat through the window. Nothing. He even popped the trunk and searched it. Satisfied that he was alone, he got back into the car. “Sure am awake now,” he said as he started back up again.

He needed some real sleep, he thought. No dreams of muses that seemed to leave him more tired than when he went to bed. For whatever reason, he recorded the incident in the car among the other meetings with the dream muse. He drank another glass of wine for good measure and collapsed into bed.

She came to him again.

“I am your Beatrice!” she sobbed, holding his collar tight in her hands and burying her face in his neck.

“You are my dream muse,” he soothed her.

“Why would you choose a flesh and blood woman, one woman, when you can have me? I can be everything! I am your everything!” she screamed.

Robert pulled away from her. She hiked her dress up and began to grind against his hips. Tears streaked her face, but her face wasn’t puffy like a real person’s would be.

“Stop it,” he said. “This isn’t real.”

“This is the only thing that’s real,” she said, voice flat and firm. The muscles around her eyes clenched as she stared unblinking into his eyes. She took his hand and placed it on her breast. Despite himself, he rose to the occasion. She slid down onto him, as warm and wet as ever, though there was nothing warm about her movements.

After a few thrusts she began to ride him wildly, gripping and twisting his collar. “Don’t you get it?” she asked. “You don’t have to choose one woman.” Her face became Annabelle’s, then a coworker’s from the bank, then his grandmother.

“Jesus,” he said, trying to crawl backward.

“I came into your life to save you, and I will,” she growled, moving her hips faster. She slammed up and down on him. His thighs began to merge with her butt, her hands with his collarbone. This time it didn’t feel orgasmic, it felt hot and twisty, like knotted muscles. Her face changed between women he knew, then women he didn’t know, faster and faster. It became a blur, then something monstrous with pointed ears and a long lolling tongue. He closed his eyes and turned his face away.

The elastic tension of their connection pulled her closer, made her bounces shorter and faster. He could feel it like a magnetic tug. “I deserve better than this,” she said.

When orgasm came it felt like a blade lancing his heart. “Love me,” she cried.

He awoke, turned on the silliest Saturday morning cartoon he could find, and tried to go back to sleep.

He didn’t see the muse again for a few days. Finally he felt like got some real sleep.

Still, he wondered if it was a good idea to date Annabelle. She sent him a few messages but he gave mostly single-word responses. Was she good enough?

Of course she was good enough. That wasn’t the problem. But he feared that if he started to fall for her, it precluded all other possibilities. If he chose this woman, he was choosing against all others. That thought led him to reread his Mar poem in his contributor’s copy.

He laughed. At himself, at the muse. “What good is limitless possibility?” He scheduled another date with Annabelle, apologizing for his short responses and blaming illness.

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They met at a trendy fusion restaurant, where she again chose to go dutch.

He told Annabelle about his dream muse – well, not everything about her – as a way of exorcising the bad feeling that had arisen around her. Speaking aloud about her to another human being seemed to make her less real, put her firmly back into his mind.

“Edison used to use the edge of sleep for inspiration,” she said. “A lot of the greats get their best ideas in dreams or on the edge of sleep. Are you familiar with lucid dreams?”

After the date he found himself back at her place. She offered him a glass of wine. She didn't have any white, but she did have pomegranate wine. She poured them each a glass, then gave him a tour of the apartment. At the bedroom, she excused herself to the bathroom.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and set his wine glass on the nightstand. He wasn't sure what happened next. Was he supposed to take his clothes off now?

He lifted the wine glass to his lips. A loud gasp came from the bathroom, then a crash. Robert set the wine glass down on the edge of the nightstand. It fell off as he got up and spilled across her white carpet. Cursing, he ran to the bathroom.

He found Annabelle sitting up against the bathroom door, water running and a tube of toothpaste squeezed out all over the counter. “Annabelle?”

With a loud *SLAP* her head jerked to the side.

“Annabelle!” he cried and bent down, scooping her up. They half ran out of the room. By the time he got her set down on her bed, a bright red handprint had formed on her cheek. She hugged him tight, then downed her glass of wine.

“What happened?” he asked.

Tearfully, she said, "I felt something knock the toothbrush out of my hand." Her words ran together, eyes getting puffy and nose turning red. Like a real person. "I looked up and saw a woman over my shoulder in the mirror. I swear to the gods. She called me a whore. I jumped back, and that's when you came in."

Robert put his face in his hands and slowly rubbed above his eyes. "This is going to sound really crazy," he said.

He told her the rest of the truth about the dream muse. Everything – the sex, the other presence he sometimes felt, falling asleep in the car.

"I know you're not into the religion stuff," she said, "but hear me out."

"I'm listening," he said.

"You said you dreamed of her as a kid? That she's your perfect woman."

"She's my teenage idea of the perfect woman, yeah," he said. "Though she seems to be worried she can't compete..."

"I wasn't fishing," she said. "And it's probably not a good idea to insult her right now, either."

"God, you really believe all this?" he said.

"I believe this," she said, pointing to the slap mark on her face. She got up and he followed her into the bathroom, where she picked up her toothbrush off the floor and began wiping the toothpaste down into the drain. Turning off the water, she went to the kitchen to get a rag and some carpet cleaner.

"A thought form is based on the idea that your thoughts are real things. Thoughts flow like the wind, but if you think the same thing hard enough, long enough, you can give it some kind of solidity. A little bit of autonomy."

“You think that’s what she is?” Annabelle started to clean up the carpet, but he took the rag and started to do it. After all, he had spilled the wine.

She clutched the pentagram around her neck while he cleaned. “I think that’s what she used to be,” she said. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you seemed to be afraid to go anywhere with your life. Afraid to pursue the wrong major, afraid of false starts. Those first few dreams seem to be an embodiment of that. A fetishization of that.”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

“There’s also what they call ensoulment. That’s when something enters into a thoughtform, the way a soul inhabits a human body. Sometimes, that something is a ray from the Divine –”

“It’s a what?”

“...Sometimes it’s something good. Sometimes it’s something bad. Sometimes it’s just something. The thoughtform takes on a life of its own. It becomes more or less like a ghost or spirit. If I had to guess, that’s what I’d guess happened with your dream muse.”

“What do we do about it?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Do you want to stay at my place tonight?” he asked. “After what happened here I can imagine you wouldn’t want to sleep here.”

“No offense, but your place is pretty much the belly of the beast,” she answered. “And besides, all my magick stuff is here. You can have the couch if you want, but you’re welcome to share the bed.”

“Um...”

She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. “I was brushing my teeth, before I was interrupted.” She went to the nightstand and removed a tiny crystal bottle. “While I do that, why don’t you draw a holy symbol on your forehead – a cross or something – and pray for protection?”

“All right...”

He unstopped it. Inside was a pale golden oil. He traced a cross on his forehead, then with his two fingers made the sign of the cross even though he wasn’t raised Catholic. When she came back she had on a sheer white nightgown and carried a knife in her hand.

“I’m sorry, but I meant to introduce this to you slowly, not get all weird in one night.”

“I think it’s safe to say I brought the weird.”

“Lay down, and I’ll put a circle of protection around the bed.” He got comfortable. “I take the left side,” she corrected him.

As he scooted over, she walked around the bed with the knife, gesturing with her arm to complete the circle where she couldn’t walk behind the headboard. Sheathing it and stuffing it under the pillow, she pulled out another bottle from the nightstand and sprinkled water around the bed. Finally she produced an incense stick, placed it in a holder, and walked it around the bed.

“Smell good?” she asked.

“Mmmm,” he said, nodding. It smelled like musk.

“I forgot to ask if you’re allergic.” He shook his head.

She took the vial of oil from him and marked something on her forehead, then put it all away, leaving the incense burning on top of the nightstand.

Climbing into bed, she sat next to him and took his hand, pulling him toward her. He accepted one closed-lipped kiss, then said, “Is this a good idea? Isn’t this going to make her mad?”

“Sex is powerful,” she told him. “I would never normally want to do this the first time, and I’m aware it probably sounds crazy, but I can use the power of our sex. Take all that energy, and try to do something with it besides just let it nourish us.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Like, protect you.”

“Us,” he said. “You’re part of it now, and I’m sorry for that.” He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers.

She kissed his fingers. “Protect us. Or drive her away.”

“Protect us,” he said. Foolish or not, he wasn’t ready to push away the dream muse yet. She had done so much for him, invested so much of herself in him, that he couldn’t hurt her that way. Not yet.

“All right,” Annabelle said. “The first thing we need is to agree on a symbol. Is the five pointed star, enclosed in a circle, all right? It’s a classic symbol of protection. Or we could use the cross.”

“The star is fine,” he said. He reached out and brushed the star on her throat.

“When you come, imagine the star. I’ll do the rest.”

He nodded, reaching to caress her hair. She cupped his jaw, leaning in to kiss him. She kissed slowly, gently, tongue running along his upper lip.

She unbuttoned his shirt, kissing faster, biting at his lip. She lifted her arms for him as he pulled the sheer nighty over her head. She had slight red indentations from her bra, a little bit of

extra weight in a band above her hips, and a blue star tattooed on her left side above the blonde pubic line. He smiled. A real woman. He kissed her from her star to her lips.

She undid his fly as they kissed. He squirmed and kicked out of his pants and was about to toss them off the bed. She stayed his hand. "Don't break the circle," she said. Twisting on his lap, she slowly lowered his clothes to the floor, apparently inside the imaginary line she had drawn. Maybe she could see it.

She took his erection in her hand and began to trace it around her opening. She smiled playfully as she looked into his eyes.

"Are you drawing another circle of protection?"

"Mmm, maybe," she said. "Speaking of which." She crawled across the bed on all fours, pulled a condom from the nightstand, and tore it open. Kneeling between his legs, she pinched the tip and rolled it down him, kissing his balls and inner thighs.

Climbing back atop him, she pressed his penis against her folds. It took a little bit for her to fully take him in, while he looked into her eyes, seeing the slight look of pain and then relief. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her breasts firm against his chest, and kissed him again.

She sat still, simply kissing, for a long while before she began to writhe side to side, back and forth. Her fingertips ran up and down his back.

"You know my usual policy is no sex magick until after the third date," she said, somewhat breathlessly.

He tickled her sides. "Aren't you supposed to be concentrating?" he asked.

"Not yet," she panted.

She kissed his neck, pressing her fingers into his back. Nibbling and then painfully biting his earlobe, she rode faster and harder.

“Tell me when you’re close,” she said.

He put his arms around her waist and helped lift her, leaning down to kiss her throat, then her breastbone, leaning her back so he could suck on her nipples. Her fingernails bit into his back.

“I’m close,” he said into her ear.

“Think of the star,” she moaned. “Release everything into me.”

He slammed into her as hard as he could. When it over took him he stopped thrusting. Annabelle took over, bouncing up and down on his lap. She lifted her arms up high in a V, throwing back her head. His penis pulsed within her; she squeezed tight against him.

After a long moment he fell back. She fell forward on top of him, laughing. “That was certainly a lot of... energy,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, throat dry.

They lay together for a while, catching their breaths, before he said, “Is it safe to break the circle to get some water? Or, like, use the bathroom?”

She skewed her lips to the side. “Hmmm. How about I go get you a glass of water, then we shower and use the bathroom, and then I’ll recast. And then we’ll try not to break the circle until morning, if we can avoid it.”

“Got it.”

He snuggled under the covers while she slipped on her nighty and left the room. He grumbled love letters to the pillow and comforter until he heard her tiptoe back in. She lifted the covers and slid underneath, draping her arm over him.

“I thought you were bringing water. No?”

“Please don’t drive me away,” his dream muse whispered.

He gasped and opened his eyes. Oh God, he thought. He still felt her arm over him. He didn’t move, barely even breathed.

Annabelle came into the doorway and froze stock still for an instant, then ran at the bed making some kind of gesture. Robert finally got the nerve to turn and give the dream woman a mighty shove.

He saw no one, and there was no sound of hitting the floor. She was just gone.

“What did you see?” he asked. “Did you see her?”

Annabelle shook her head. Just the shape of her under the blanket. Fuck. This is so beyond my league. She can strike someone without any physical hand. I can’t even image anything like that.”

Robert sat up and wiped his face off. “Let’s just hope... let’s just hope that it’s so hard to do, that she can only just barely do it. And your efforts against her will be enough to tip that balance.”

“Ha. You have a lot of confidence in someone who just failed.”

“Give it time,” he said. “Spells aren’t instant, are they?”

“Look at you, the expert,” she teased. “But, you’re right.”

They showered together, kissing quietly but too tired for anything else.

“She seems to advocate a featureless life, or a life so crazy and blurred it amounts to the same thing,” Annabelle said as they toweled off.

“Seems like.”

“If she were to ever truly possess you, she would throw you out as soon as she tired of you, or when you proved not to be a blank slate she could write her own wishes on, or when she gets what she wants but it doesn’t fulfill her.”

“And yet, she used to be a part of me.” Something about that struck him as important, but he wasn’t sure what.

He climbed back into bed, where Annabelle renewed her circle of protection and lit another incense stick. She put little herbal bags under their pillows and laid things around the bed – a broomstick, as staff, even a sword of all things. Robert hoped his dream lover couldn’t lift that sword.

Annabelle sat awake, mumbling prayers or incantations, but Robert couldn’t keep his eyes open. He noted how easily he accepted Annabelle’s behavior. Would it have been so smooth without a demon lover lending some credence to things? He’d had pentacle-wearing friends before but never really seen anything they did.

Asleep, he followed the swirling colors to their inevitable end. He sat down on the bed next to his once-muse. “Please don’t drive me away,” she said.

How weak she seemed in that moment. And not just emotionally. She seemed semi-transparent. A burning blue star shone within her, dividing her front-from-back.

“What do you want from me?” he asked her. Taking a risk, he took her hand in his.

“What we’ve always wanted,” she said. “A life that’s just us. To be unblemished by life, matured but not scarred.”

“To be safe,” he whispered.

“To be safe,” she echoed and leaned in to kiss him.

He allowed it, one last time. It wasn't cheating on Annabelle, even though they'd never really had that conversation. If anything, this was masturbation.

This time he rolled her over and lay on top. "I'm sorry you never had a name," he said.

"No, don't name me –" she said.

"– because then you'll be stuck with it, I get it," he said. He kissed from her lips to her lips, tracing stars with his tongue. Annabelle's burning magick star flared a little every time he did it. He could see that lurking dark presence, trapped behind the star, not quite able to reach him.

He drove into her. "My beautiful muse," he said into the side of her neck, thrusting into her.

"Yes?" she moaned.

He lifted her legs up on either side of him. She crossed her ankles behind him, pulling him in.

"You want to be safe," he said to her, gently.

"Yes," she said.

"What if we said, we want to not need to be afraid. That's just as good."

"Yes," she agreed, leaning back into the pillows. He kissed all over her breasts and neck as he pounded into her. Their loins began to merge together. He welcomed it, invited it, and their legs began to tangle together too.

"Accept my love, finally," he said.

"Yes!" She screamed.

He climaxed within her, pushing with all he had. The burning pentagram, and the something other it held back, was pushed the rest of the way through her back, through the bed,

disappearing to who knew where. She screamed in climax. He drew her in close, their flesh melting together.

“I name you Unblemished. I’ll respect you and always consider you, but you don’t rule my life anymore.”

He woke slowly, rested, not with a start like he had so many times recently. Annabelle was sitting up, playing idly with her golden curls in the sunlight. Her other hand fiddled her knife.

“Good morning sweetie,” he said. “Is it too soon to call you sweetie?”