

## **(Nothing but) Art**

Ours is an upstairs-downstairs apartment in the district of New York that was once Brooklyn. Chal uses the loft for painting and sculpture; he repurposes old fragments of society - silicon circuit boards, cables. He paints with organic dyes which cause a mess: oil paints are scarce, acrylics are 'trouble'. He puts his work up in the yard out back, and when he's lucky, exhibits it in the gallery on the corner of sixth street and eleventh.

I am walking out of our bedroom where he's still asleep. I am shirking our morning routine. Chal makes coffee using a kettle, ground beans and filter - a "small homage to antiquity" which he insists upon and I tolerate. I cook breakfast but I leave for the university before he finishes eating, after putting on the clothes which he has laid out for me on the bed.

This morning, I've ended my switch-off period four hours early, well before the sun has risen. It's the weekend and so I haven't dressed; I only ever do this when we meet others. I suspect if I don't change my clothes every day my colleagues would notice, would add it to the perfectly formed list of my 'inhumanness'.

I can see just about make out the colour of Chal's reddish-blond hair dusting across the pillow. The first thing he does on waking is throw open the curtains in our bedroom. When we first moved in together, I asked him why he would choose an apartment with windows that occupy most of the wall space - it would be expensive to heat, and he suffers in the cold. He just looked at me, small smile on his lips - "*it's about the light*".

He's curled up on his side, a thumb pressed to the corner of his mouth. His other hand hangs limp over the edge of the bed and I can make out mud-grey marks of clay on his fingertips. There is a mostly empty bottle of wine on the floor. When he is sleeping, I notice a strong resemblance between him now and the stored images I have of him when he was twenty-one. His skin is more sun-dappled, his beard - now existent - is peppered with white. He will not take any age modifiers.

I carry on to the kitchen. On the side are heaped a broken mug, one plate of mostly unconsumed pasta, and a book of textile prints by Chal's friend from college. It's not quite what Chal would refer to as a sketchbook but it contains glued-down fabrics, layered over paint and photographs. Earlier, I had called them shapeless.

“The thing you don’t get about textiles is that they have richness, depth and ch-”

Chal’s voice booms through the kitchen by accident, and I cut it off as soon as I realise it’s not just playing in my head. A processing error. Even in the liminal space of four am, I can hear the passive aggression in his tone. Chal would refer to this as ‘overthinking it’: *“thing is Keni, you guys think more than humans do – we’re not that complex. Humans just talk out our asses most the time. You can’t take us too seriously.”* You and us, ours and yours, inhumans and humans. The dishes remain on the side, but I take the book.

The artist has known Chal since they were boys, and even though they were setting out together, the printmaker has done well for himself. Occasionally, we see him at gallery events where we wear patched up suits and twice re-heeled shoes. He earns enough from his work to live off, has a “kitsch little place, just by the park”, two children and a wife who “really intimidates you, if you’re not careful”. When he says these things, I do not have to scan through any possible meanings: Chal’s voice is unambiguously bitter.

I leaf through the pages. The fact is I don’t dislike the prints. The artist is skilled, and they are well made. My autonomous response is that they are pleasing to look at. But when Chal looks through the book at dinner, his shoulders drop a fraction of an inch. I lace my fingers with his. This time, he pulls away.

Up the loft stairs is Chal’s studio, and in general I keep well away from it apart from to Hoover. In our early days together, I’d often sit and watch him paint.

*“Do you feel much when you look at this?” A blue canvas with two figures embracing on it.*

*“I think sadness. Maybe a bit bittersweet.”*

*“Interesting! Good. Well not good, obviously, if you’re sad.” He flings his arm around my shoulders, kisses my cheek. He knows I don’t feel this, per se, but it comforts me anyway.*

*“Thanks for telling me, it’s hard to guess sometimes.”*

We would listen to my choice of music – Chal finds this mixed, even now. It is not what my computational ability has adapted towards over time, but I find I have a good academic understanding of music: its cadences, its rhythms, its colour. Time has given me taste. And after hours, when he grew tired of painting, he’d collapse next to me on the floor and we’d

watch the evening out of the window. Those moments, if I were to triangulate the response of my mind to the stimuli, I would say I felt perfectly happy.

Chal describes sadness as a “physical feeling”. When his mother passed away, he lost approximately ten percent of his body weight, and he would tell me that his heart felt as though it was being ripped apart. I do not have a biological heart. When Chal dies, I will not be capable of crying. But I am sewn to Chal, like fabric to paper. A part of my basic functionality will cease if Chal isn’t there. This doesn’t physically hurt me, I somehow just know it.

*“Sometimes, Keni, it’s just difficult with you. It all has to end – life, us, all of it. That’s the point.”*

*“I don’t see how an ending benefits either of us when an ending isn’t the only option.”*

*“All of you, you – Maybe you just don’t get any of it. Art, my art, it’s just pointless to you right?” He drinks from his mug, and trips as he stands up and drops it. It smashes into three on the floor. The pasta goes uneaten on the side.*

I’ve never made art. When I first met Chal, this was something of a joke between us. Even for an inhuman, I was always stuffy. He was a “painter pretending to be a philosophy student”. Some beings like me are adapted to analyse and create new works of art or music but I was designed as a generalist – easy to place in a variety of fields. There is a small square canvas on a make-shift easel that Chal hasn’t put away. I don’t know how to use the dyes really, I’ve only ever watched Chal do it.

I expect the dye to run and drip but instead it seeps into the material. I scan through the hundreds of collected images of each of Chal’s paintings, and each of them makes me conscious of different emotions. But one lingers. I am trying very hard to place it. It sits somewhere between regret and belonging. I’ve never encountered it before. I close my eyes and try to think of how Chal would describe it. Humans have it so easy – when they are happy, they laugh; when they are sad, they cry.

I make many mistakes, each time scrubbing at the painting with my fingers, or coating it in other dye. And by the time I have finished it, I need to rest – my processing power, the

amount of cross-referencing and neural development required to finish the painting have drained me. I close my eyes for a moment.

I apply the same learning algorithms to the painting that I would to a work of Chal's. He wasn't wrong. I have borrowed many of his techniques, but none of his mastery is in the painting. "*It's just pointless to you right?*" I pick it off the easel and without a second thought put it in the dustbin at the entrance to the studio.

As I descend the stairs, I scan through photographs of us through the last twenty years, together and apart, separate and united. In the kitchen, I clean away the uneaten pasta and broken mug and, walking back to bed, I wonder what exactly it would be like to experience sadness in any other way than this.

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It's a Sunday morning. I exit my switch-off period to the uncharacteristically bright sound of whistling from down the hall. Pale light streams in through the window. As I sit up in bed, my joints creak from inaction. A small painting is hanging on our bedroom wall in front of me. Under it, a label: '*by Keni*'.