

Crown of Thorns

Luke spent the night teaching Joshua every way that he could gasp. He took great delight in every slight stiffening or halting breath. Luke kept a tallying count by scratching red hashmarks down Joshua's back with his fingernail. Soon, they flowed together into a tapestry indicative of his thorough education. The actual number became meaningless as the moon fell behind the mountains.

Joshua slept curled on his chest. He seemed so small, with Luke's hand encircling his waist. His neck was an even snugger fit. His breathing was shallow, but not labored; Luke had done no permanent damage. By tomorrow, only a few telltale marks would remain. While he slept, Luke allowed his gaze to explore Joshua's tight body. The taut lines of his calves shone in the dim light. His slow breathing lifted his sculpted sternum with every inhalation. His artist hands were clutched into impotent fists.

They awoke later than intended, becoming aware of each other in slow motions. Joshua rose from the bed and began grabbing his clothes. Luke stood and followed him at a distance, stepping out of the way as Joshua slipped around the apartment. When Joshua passed by in front of him, Luke wrapped his arm around Joshua's back and dragged his body against him. They kissed for a prolonged span.

"Don't go today. You're late already," Luke said.

Joshua's face was apologetic and unsmiling. Touseled and stinking of sex, he hunched under Luke's gaze and pressed a palm against Luke's chest. His nails slid across the hair there before contracting back into a fist. Without his glasses on, he squinted. His eyes were like silent songbirds under his penciled-in eyebrows. They came alive in only three situations; when he was painting, when he was moaning, and when he was angry.

"I have to go, you know that."

“You have to do very little,” Luke said, loosening his grip. There was no contest of size between them, but Luke carried his weighed shoulders as an afterthought. He rarely saw need to use that power.

“I have to do this.”

Luke took Joshua’s shirt from his hand and draped it over his back, helping him into it. He fastened the buttons with tiny motions, fingertips trailing between the fabric and the skin beneath. Joshua shivered. Luke left most of the shirt unbuttoned

“I do hate when you go to see your other man.”

“Don’t call it that Luke. It’s ridiculous.”

He stepped into his slacks and let Luke raise them about his waist. The seven motions required to fasten his pants and belt took immeasurable gasps.

“It’s just church Luke. Everyone goes,” Joshua said, breathless.

“I don’t.”

“Things are simpler for you. You never had faith.”

They stepped an inch apart, and Joshua audibly breathed out. Their apartment was almost Spartan, with bone-white walls and wide windows. A mattress on the floor and three tables scattered around the bedroom were their only furnishings. Joshua walked past him and out of the room, going to prepare breakfast. Luke stayed a pace behind him, plucking Joshua’s glasses and jewelry off the ground. Their main room was no more complicated than the bedroom, with only a sofa, coffee table, and adjoining kitchen. A stack of canvases leaned against one wall, the sum collective of three years of Joshua’s creative energies. They hadn’t ever gotten around to hanging them.

“I have enormous faith, in many things. I just don’t have your faith.”

“Do you have faith in me?”

“Of course.”

“Then just let me go.”

He was doing a poor job buttering his toast. Luke stepped to him and slid the glasses onto the bridge of his nose, then cupped his chin like an egg and began fitting his earrings in. The cold metal rings slid into their accustomed places, with Luke's guiding hands pivoting Joshua's face into position. Joshua never stopped eating, eyes unfocused and facing straight outward.

"I want you to come right back when you're done. I'm not done with you," Luke said.

"Really? I suppose I'll have enough trouble hiding the marks I have now. They stick up past my collar."

Luke rested his hands on the smaller man's hips. Between his thumbs and forefingers, he constricted the hipbone's projections, gaining total control of his partner. His slipped into his python voice, moist lips pressed against Joshua's temple.

"I didn't even draw blood. You got off easy. And now I'm letting you go, against my better judgment. You should be grateful."

His grip tightened by fractions of a millimeter. His fingertips twisted on bone. Joshua lurched forwards, his own hands gripping Luke's shoulders convulsively. They dug in. It stung.

A moan, "I am, sir. Thank you."

Luke loosened his grip and encircled Joshua with his arms. They kissed, and both released the tension in their forms. They rested against each other. It always amazed Luke how loud a heartbeat was in a quiet room, and now he focused on Joshua's. He could detect arousal in the fervor of the pulsing.

"Would you have really drawn blood?" It was a whisper, stuck indecisively between amazed and pleading.

"Yes." Maybe.

Joshua pulled away, meeting Luke's gaze after a moment of hesitation. In total silence, the two exchanged a thousand words of trust. Neither could read the face of the man opposite him. At length, Joshua busied himself with his buttons, breakfast finished. Luke stepped backwards and sat on the sofa, watching him. His eyes burned, a furnace in each deep socket. Neither found words until Joshua was taking his worn Bible from the stool by the door.

"I'll come back quickly. Just get dressed. We have errands."

He left without waiting for a response, leaving Luke alone. Joshua went to his church every Sunday, and every day returned miserable. Luke refused to go. They didn't want him there, and so he saw no reason to go. Instead he rose and strode to the canvases. They deserved a better home than being propped against the wall.

This brushwork was the first thing that had intrigued him. His fingers ran across the surface, feeling the slight texture of the paints. The differences were almost too small to sense. He admired the workmanship of the images. It was emotive work, jagged in composition, with a stark simplicity to them. Each stroke was writing volumes of tone and form without penning a word. The figures were exclusively male, ethereal, otherworldly, wrapped in cloth, and profound in expression. Luke ran his hands over the canvas's frame, feeling the paper and the wood and the rivets. It was a comfortable feeling, to hold such frames in his hands. They had an alluring solidity that matched the precise firmness of the painting's subjects. The men were hard, clear, and distinct. They looked like no one Luke had ever seen.

He looked at every image in turn, and understood little. There was little to be understood, and in that there was an enormous quantity of beauty. The more he looked, the more they appealed to his senses. Every line evoked sensation in him far deeper than his retinas. Each image was a single note under his fingers. A single flavor on the wind. He savored them equally.

He uncovered the last piece, a smaller canvas hidden under the others. It was repulsive by comparison. The canvas was drenched in paints thickly enough to sag inwards. It was inelegant. His hands struggled to find a clear place to grasp, and so he left it leaning against the wall. It was cruel.

There was nothing on the page besides paint. He stared at the flood and was awed by its monstrous roughness. It was an image calloused beyond flexing and burned beyond recognition, and within it he could not identify even color. It was an image that could not rightly be seen, no matter how he approached it. He sat on the floor, beside the neat pile of simple canvases, and was rendered incapable of thought.

Joshua returned some time later. He watched Luke for several moments, steeling himself. When he did walk closer and lay a hand on Luke's shoulder, it provoked no response. He took the painting in a firm grip, lifting it away from the wall and laying it atop the others. It was Luke who broke the silence.

"What is it? It's like nothing I've seen."

Joshua ran his hand over the paint, tracing a long cross. "Have you seen it?"

"I've looked at it. I don't even know where to begin."

"Of course you don't."

Luke pushed himself to his feet and looked at Joshua. His lips formed a thin line above his unshaven jawline.

"I've been working on this piece for weeks, Luke. I paint nothing else."

"Why hadn't I seen it before?"

"Because I was hiding it from you. You don't see it even now."

"Don't see what?"

Joshua threw his arms up in frustration. He lay his Bible down on the sofa and strode across the room, pacing. His motions became more erratic. Luke could see Joshua struggling to find words.

“It’s the - the crucifixion.”

Luke looked at the canvas again and saw only paint.

“I don’t see - ”

“Oh, Of course you don’t. I know that. I knew you wouldn’t see it like I do. I can’t look at it and see anything but the cross. But I knew you wouldn’t. It’s like I said Luke, things are simpler for you.”

“What, because I’m not religious? You made a choice Joshua.”

“I never chose to see Him. When I close my eyes, He’s there with me.”

“You’ve been going to church too much.”

“No.” It was a crashing wave in a single word. “I haven’t been going enough.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What good does it do you?”

Joshua shook his head with measured motions. “I’m very confused Luke. Sometimes, church is the only place I feel like I understand things. Things are simpler.”

“Of course it is. There’s only one way to understand things in a church. That is precisely the problem. Don’t lie and tell me they accept you.”

Joshua’s response caught in his mouth. His gaze fell to the floor, but his back remained straight as a board. Luke calmed his growing anger. He intended to let Joshua speak first, and so turned his gaze back on the canvas. It was just as indistinct now as before. It was too complicated to have discernable form. There was no beauty in such complexity. It was only a muddled misrepresentation.

“They accept me just fine. It’s you they have a problem with,” Joshua said.

“You chose me too. The church doesn’t control your heart.”

“Oh, my heart? Is that what you have? My heart, or my blood? My compliance?”

The feral anger in his chest rejected his attempts to sate it, flexing his ribs outwards. Luke felt himself lose control of his breathing. He pulled himself up to his full height.

“You haven’t been complaining. When we lay together, you never complain. I heard no complaints when you told me of your love.”

“There is no love that does not come from God.”

“Don’t quote scripture at me.” He spoke with the roar of thunder, with all the crackling energy of lightning. “You know that they can’t accept you, and you know that I’ve never done a damn thing to you that you didn’t love.”

“You mean that I didn’t lust? You’ve certainly shown me that in excess.”

“This was never about the lust. You mean something to me. You’re different.”

“Oh, don’t remind me, Luke. I am different every moment of my life.”

“That isn’t a bad thing. Not all love is the exact same.”

“Oh, stop calling this love,” Joshua said. His eyes were coming alive in bursts of fury. They leaked through his tear ducts and blazed across his twisted face. Luke stood, trembling, and felt his hands ball into fists without his consent. His mind was ruled by passion. Joshua saw his anger and sneered.

“You know nothing of love, Luke. You’ve never shown me any love I could see.”

Luke burned. His hands moved without consideration. They grabbed the worn Bible by the bindings and threw it, hard. Joshua leaned out of the way with a yell of rage, and the book was torn apart against the far wall. The pages separated from their spine and fell towards the kitchen floor. Each one caught in the air and spun separately, dancing to invisible strings.

Joshua had lunged towards him before the pages even touched the ground. His hand curled into a ball of hate and veins, rising against Luke’s jaw. One of his fingernails was chipped, where he had caught it between the door and the wall. Luke had kissed that fingertip, then the blot of purple paint staining the second knuckle, then his tender wrist. The first time he had held that hand had been hidden below the desk and between their thighs, with eyes locked resolutely forward on the PowerPoint. Soon, however, the

back corner of the lecture hall became an anatomy lab of unusual experiments. That hand had picked eyelashes off Luke's face.

The blow caught Luke off guard with its speed and ferocity, knocking him over. Joshua fell on top of him, yelling something guttural. Their combined weight crushed many of the canvases beneath his back. Luke's hands shot forward and hit Joshua in unison, one in the collarbone and other in the gut. Joshua's collarbone was a ridge of unguarded bone, one that Luke had traced with his lips repeatedly. The bone formed several hollows, inlets of taut skin that were hairless and, for unidentified reasons, ticklish. His navel had been jeweled when they first met, but at Luke's insistence he had let the piercing heal. The pale plain of his stomach had enthralled Luke. He had cried hot tears into that skin.

Joshua was knocked back onto his feet, gagged, stumbled, and coughed blood onto Luke's carpet. He had bitten his tongue. Before he could regain his composure, Luke hit him in the jaw with all the force he could muster. It was destroying a work of art, a jaw with ridges so pronounced that they formed right angles. His jaw was his strongest line, and Luke had measured them all. He had tested every part of Joshua's body within his grip, and found them all gentle with beauty. But most of all, his jaw.

Joshua fell to the floor.

He drifted in and out of consciousness. Luke bent over him, touching his face. His fingertips were electric. Joshua was not afraid as Luke carried him to the bathroom. He hadn't the strength to resist, but also hadn't the desire. Luke's rough hands were familiar as they undressed him. There were hands that he had relied upon. These were hands he could imagine more clearly than his own. Their strength and their kindness both were known to him.

The pair stood in the shower, with Joshua leaning his weight fully on Luke's chest. It took several minutes for Joshua's head to clear, but even then he did not move

from Luke's embrace. Before long their hands had found each other, and Joshua's breathing had calmed. His lip was bleeding, coating both of their chests. Luke didn't seem to mind. The water ran hot over their heads.

"I don't know what other love I can show you Joshua. I don't know what else I can give," Luke said. Their hands were holding each other so loosely that only momentum and habit kept them connected. The slightest tremble would tear them from each other's grasp.

"I know. I know."

"If I'm not enough, then I'm afraid. This is all that I am."

"It might be enough."

"The entire world is screaming in your ear to leave me. All I can do is whisper no. Don't tell me that will be enough."

"I don't want to leave."

"How can I make you stay?"

Joshua tried not to hold his eyes open. The water ran across his eyelashes and around his eyes, forcing them closed. He saw Him then, against every burning urge in his body.

"You can't."

"Don't leave me. I want you here."

Joshua put his hands on Luke's cheeks and ran his thumbs along the curve of his eye sockets. Luke's eyes lacked their usual fire. They were like spent suns, stars exhausted from their celestial machinations.

"I'm not leaving now. We can try something else."

His Bible was broken beyond repair. Many of his paintings, too, had been destroyed. It made him feel hollow, like parts of his essence had been exhausted. His strength felt very transient.

Luke seemed to see the sadness in his eyes and wrapped his arms around Joshua's back. His hands cupped Joshua's shoulder blades. Each one of his fingertips felt different. They felt roughshod and purposeful and profoundly strong. They felt familiar.

Joshua couldn't find words to describe his pains. He pictured it with great smears of indistinct paint, and for the first time in his life found them insufficient. It was all just color and form. It was all just a pretty page. At the end of all time, how could paintings comfort a lonely man?

Their mortal hearts beat slowly. The water flows over their lips. They are both too afraid to kiss, because kisses end. There is an inevitable finality in every kiss. There is always a last kiss. They are afraid.