

UNTITLED SCULPTURAL DISTURBANCE

“What is it?”

Charlie holds up two fingers. He does not turn around to look at me. He does gesture for me to enter the room. So I do. But quietly.

Charlie is so close to it that, at first, it blends in with his white undershirt. He has a large metal pipe in one hand, which he is using to roll out its edges, or planes, I guess is what you call them, and with his other hand he’s gently holding up the other side. The pipe is almost covered in white plaster. There are blocks of clay on the floor, of various shapes, and a bucket of plaster with a spatula sticking out of it. There’s another spatula on the floor, which is probably glued there, stagnant with several hours’ disuse. One of Charlie’s pant legs is rolled halfway up his calf and there are bits of plaster or paint stuck in his leg hair. He is barefoot, and as he moves to add a layer of plaster to one of the blocks, he steps backward onto a tube of white acrylic. A fat glob of paint loops out onto the floor. He doesn’t seem to notice.

Because Charlie is more or less working in a closet, it doesn’t take long to get over to him. Maybe two, three steps. I move slowly to match his energy, the intensity of his gaze. He can’t take his eyes off it.

And neither can I. It’s unlike anything he’s ever made.

Then again, I’m not exactly sure what I’m looking at. I would never admit this to Charlie; I’ve convinced myself that my enthusiasm for his work has blinded him to the fact that I’m more or less ignorant of the intricate meanings of contemporary art. I simply think about how it makes me feel.

Charlie’s newest creation makes me feel like I’ve pulled back the curtain in a dressing room and seen something I shouldn’t have. It’s not vulgar—but it’s incredibly *private*. Almost intimate. Something in the way the blocks come together to cast interlocking shadows over one another, maybe, or the way Charlie lays his hands on it.

Or it could be the size of the room. We converted a storage closet in the apartment into a sort of haphazard studio space. Charlie has been selling work more regularly, lately, and needs a place to work in private. A place to grow his craft. Last month the assistant to the associate director of the Museum of Contemporary Art came to an exhibition where several of his pieces were on display. We don’t know if she actually looked at his

pieces, let alone if she liked them, but it's as close as Charlie's ever been to being discovered, and that's closer than most. None of his art school friends have ever come that close. He told me this a few nights ago as we lay together, sweating, under a ceiling fan in our double bed.

Charlie puts down the plaster-covered pipe and now he has both hands on it. His face is very close to it, and he's examining the flat ledges he's been rolling. They look very flat to me, but he is frowning now, displeased. He gets up off his knees and balances low on the balls of his feet, slowly encircles his creation, feeling along this crevice and that, pushing one clay block a few inches higher and then scooping congealed plaster out of the bucket with his bare hand to fill in a crack formed from the repositioning. He uses the other hand to pat little bits of the plaster in place. Like applying concealer, only white. All of it is white. The clay. The plaster. Charlie's shirt and hands. Even his nose is smeared with powdery streaks.

I love the little white streaks on Charlie's nose. I want to kneel down with him and scoop a handful of plaster out of the bucket myself and draw matching lines on my face.

When Charlie is working, his fingers move so deftly, subconsciously, even. He's beautiful when he works. Sometimes, when he catches me watching him, he comes up to me and pulls at my hair with hands covered in clay or paint and I say knock it off, are you crazy, because I dye my hair and it's hard to get out. He's always got his art all over his face and hands.

Some nights, as he falls asleep, I run my fingers through his hair and pick out fragments of plaster and polyurethane.

Tonight, though, there will be no games, no pulling of hair. I've never seen Charlie so intensely focused. Like I'm not even in the room. I'm afraid to say anything, wary of breaking his otherworldly concentration. I take one step back as he moves, crouching, around to my side of the sculpture again, hands moving gingerly over the jagged blocks protruding at seemingly random angles—angles that, I'm sure, Charlie painstakingly created. He is not one of those haphazard contemporary artists who throws paint backwards over his shoulder onto a canvas. His randomness is calculated, precise.

Charlie wipes his hands on his plaster and paint-splattered jeans and stands. He looks down at the sculpture and scratches just behind one of his ears. A small bit of plaster clumps together in his hair.

He turns and looks at me, finally. "Hey," I say.

"Hey."

Charlie opens his arms and moves to hug me, but I stop him with a hand planted firmly in the center of his chest.

"Plaster."

"Oh," he says. "Yeah."

I reach out and pick the chunk of plaster out of his hair. I run my fingers over the back of his neck. He kisses my nose.

“Almost finished?”

Charlie shakes his head.

“This one is going to be big,” he says. “As tall as you.”

I look down. It’s about three feet tall at the moment.

“I’m not very big,” I say.

Charlie grins and says, “Big enough.” Then he says, “Hey. I have an idea.”

He pulls his shirt over his head and throws it on the floor.

I think he maybe threw it right on that glob of acrylic. But what’s one shirt when you have a body like Charlie’s. I take off my blouse and almost throw it on the floor, too, then I remember it’s new. My first new blouse in months. I step just outside into the adjacent kitchen and lay it over a chair.

Charlie comes up close behind me and wraps his arms around my bare waist. His chest is warm. He rubs his stubbly face on my shoulder.

I think about the plaster he wiped on his jeans and then I think, oh, to hell with it. I turn around.

Charlie is looking back at the sculpture. “Hey,” he says. “Give me one second.”

His arms drop away from my body and he kneels back down next to it. He wipes the acrylic off the floor and smears it along one edge. Then another.

I look down at my stomach and there are little white streaks above the navel.

I sit down in the chair. I watch Charlie.

I pick all the plaster off my stomach. Then I start peeling the polish off my chipped nails.

He doesn’t look at me until he’s finished with it.

*

Blake’s gallery is on an industrial street with cracks heaving up out of the pavement. Not in the romantic way, with little green flower buds sprouting up from the wreckage; in the it-gets- goddamn-freezing-here way, where the ice sets out on its inevitable path of destruction year after year. Not coincidentally, the buildings on this street are fortresses of coated steel and aluminum, things of practical form and function rather than beauty. The city’s architectural tours don’t come here.

On most days, there are more trucks on the street than people, loaded and unloaded with a cacophony of parts used to make other, more recognizable things: caps that fit over the ends of automated coffee spouts, triangular razors that fit into electric can openers, little springs and bolts attached to the inner workings of cars that the men making

the springs and bolts have never had the luxury to wish for. By night the street isn't much different; the trucks change, the men change, commerce goes on uninterrupted. Blake and Charlie—or Blake and whichever artist is showing next—move about behind the frosted glass windows of the gallery, hanging and sawing and hammering and adjusting and hanging and adjusting. The men loading the trucks pay them no mind.

Tonight couples crowd around the gallery's entryway and burning cigarette ends flickering dimly in the frigid November air. The cloud of smoke around them is hazy in the light streaming through the windows of the gallery. White smoke surrounded by a whiter glare. It seems appropriate for Charlie's first showing of the sculpture. I wonder if he had Blake install extra-white lights for tonight, just in case. It seems like the kind of thing they would discuss.

I've been to the gallery before, helped Charlie with installs or just sat cross-legged on the floor as he and Blake pounded nails into walls and meticulously balanced frames and sculptures. The shows have always been casual. Cans of PBR and crackers, cheese optional. Tonight the girls out front are in runway-high stilettos. Their bags are patent, too big for their bodies, full of silver and gold fixtures. My bag is a friend's mother's Kate Spade from several seasons ago. From across the street, the girls can't see that the corners are ever-so-slightly worn. I could be anyone to them. Not the girl whose apartment has drafts around the windows, frames covered in layers of packing tape; undetectable cracks that slowly submit to the wind and rain and weathering ice.

But I've never missed one of Charlie's gallery openings. I tighten the belt of my trenchcoat, tilt my face slightly upward and start across the street. The girls in the doorway of the gallery pucker their perfectly rouged lips and blow bright white mist across the faces of their companions. They glance at me as I pass by, holding my breath, squinting against the light as I pull open the gallery door. Charlie left the apartment early tonight, mumbling about final preparations. If he was here, he would make some smart, artsy comment and send the whole pack of carcinogen-laden girls into stitches. He's a funny guy. Or a moderately funny, attractive guy, which is just as well.

The first person I recognize when I walk in is Elmer. The gallery is packed, but he's still a head taller than everyone else. I take a few steps through the crowd, away from most of the residual smoke in the entryway, and expel my breath in a forceful puff.

"Word," Elmer says when he sees me, and pushes past a group of men in varying grey suit jackets and tight, dark jeans. He bobs his head in inexplicable agreement when he reaches me. Like he's responding to a suggestion I just made to go buy six-packs and get wasted.