

The Footsteps Behind
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When the glass doors slid apart there was a spray of freezing rain, and a pressure urging Erika back into the bright warmth of the gallery. The wind whipped stinging droplets against her arms and into her cleavage. She pulled her tiny jacket around her shoulders. A sudden flurry blinded her.

She looked back. Troy was waving his half empty wine glass as he told some story to Shanisse and Kerryn. Probably the one about what he said to the Porsche dealer. His apartment had a breathtaking view, but he liked to fight for a bargain. Their moist lips were parted, teeth sparkling. There was no point waiting for him.

Troy always wanted to go to gallery openings, and he always left her alone, to wander from canvas to canvas, photo to photo, trying to see what was special about them. Sometimes there was one she liked. A poor man with lines in his face and sad eyes. A landscape with soft colours.

But she never could get installations. Junk in the middle of the floor. And the main installation was a real, live dog, chained to a stake. There was a red line around it and a security guard. It looked like they weren't feeding it enough. People were standing around laughing and chatting and drinking their wine while the dog rested its head on its paws and did that yawning thing they do when they're angry and frightened.

Someone leaned against the inside of the the gallery window. In the momentary reflection of the street Erika saw a face, pale and clenched, hovering at her shoulder. She turned quickly. There was nothing there.

Here was a cab. Erika walked out a little into the road and tried to flag it down. The cabbie deliberately avoided seeing her. She tried a few more. The last one hit a puddle and covered her stockings with mud. Her shoes could probably be saved. She would just have to walk. It wasn't far.

There was a way through an alley. She used it often enough in daylight. Now she saw how badly it was lit, how all the rear windows were blind and dark. Gloomy shapes resolved into rusted fire escapes and garbage.

When the wind lulled for a moment Erika thought she heard footsteps. She kept walking and looking straight ahead, but she lightened her step and listened hard. There they were again.

These shoes were useless. She hadn't been able to resist them in the shop window, six inch stilettos with sharp, sleek toes. What she needed now was runners.

She heard them again. Erika ducked behind a skip and pulled off her shoes. The stockings were ruined anyway. She peered around the corner, blinking to clear the water from her eyes. There was nothing to see.

Erika began walking, more quickly now, scanning the ground, hoping to avoid the needles before they pierced her bare sole. She was running. The footsteps were louder now, and faster. She was breathing hard, sobbing, her hair sodden and whipping her face, her stockings in shreds, her feet torn and bleeding.

A hurricane wire gate blocked the way, its bolt padlocked. This was the wrong alley. Directly behind her, the footsteps stopped. She turned.

He was cloaked in some dark, shapeless garment, the light behind him, his eyes lost in the shadow of a hood. Erika could make out a pale jaw and thin lips.

"Let me go. Please."

He didn't move. The lips curled a little.

"You can have my money. Here."

He didn't move. She unclenched her hand and the bills fell like leaves into the mud. He didn't even glance down.

"What do you want?"

His chest inflated and deflated. The sigh was inaudible. When he spoke his voice danced from note to note like a whispered song.

"I want to help you."

There was a pause. Was he waiting for her?

As she took a breath he spoke again.

"How do you like this weather?"

He waited. She made no sound.

"Feel it. Feel the rain. Feel the cold. You're alive, you can feel. Feel it."

He turned his face up to the sky, but his eyes remained dark.

"Feel the pain in your feet. It's good to feel pain."

Suddenly Erika felt very cold.

"You don't even know you're alive. You've forgotten. You look at beauty, but you don't see it. You see nothing."

He turned his face back down to her.

"I'm going to help you remember. Not for long. It doesn't have to be long."

Erika's lips were dry. Her mouth wouldn't open. Her breath was trapped in her throat.

"A simple lesson. You'll be mindful. Authentic. For a precious moment."

He moved a step closer, his dark bulk looming over her, and bent down his head.

"Do you know Kierkegaard?"

Erika's jaws were suddenly aching, strained beyond their limit, and a sound she had never heard burst from the deepest well of her being, reverberating in her skull, blurring her vision. She swung the stiletto up from her side at the full stretch of her arm. The heel vanished beneath his hood, her elbow jarred, his back arched and he rose to the tips of his toes, his face again towards the sky. Then he sank to his knees, hood thrown back, one eye wide.

The memory of her shriek rang between the walls. Erika dropped the other shoe and ran.

The gallery doors slid open and Erika walked in. On the polished floor she left a trail of mud and blood. Black tears streaked her cheeks. Rivulets ran from her clothes and hair. Troy broke off, his mouth agape.

"Erika? Is it raining out there?"

She passed him without a word, crossed the red line, and grasped the stake with both hands. With a convulsive heave she wrenched it from the floor. The security guard thought about taking a step toward her. She stopped him with a glance. The dog cocked its head, studying her face.

"Come on, Kierkegaard. Walkies."

Together they went out into the storm.

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Look at you sipping your chilled Chardonnay,
Chattering cheerfully, nothing to say,
Glorified, gratified, satisfied, smug,
Snug as a bug in a rug on a drug.

Look at your eyes disconnect from your brain,
As you gaze unimpressed at a creature in pain,
Look at your brain disconnect from your heart,
As you glide through a gallery calling it art.

Look at your manicure, look at your hair,
Nothing can touch you and teach you to care,
Nothing can open your eyes to the light,
To the fright of the sight of the plight of the night.

When will you wake to the world you destroyed,
To the howl of the horror, the voice of the void?

When will it pierce through your passionproof skin,
To the moistness and softness and pinkness within?

Look in the mirror. A glimpse of a face,
A flash of a feel of a frozen embrace,
What is the fate you are failing to flee?
You see your reflection; you never see me.

Cloaked in a cloud, camouflaged and concealed,
I am the reckoning, rarely revealed,
I am the monster that mangles your mind,
I am the footsteps that echo behind.