

Sketches

Three short pieces originally written by hand, using prompts that were given. Enjoy!

Carnival

PROMPT: Incorporate the words knot, wheel, wig and circle

My stomach is tied into knots. I'm standing beneath the big wheel, watching it go around and around and around. I feel sick.

"Don't be a wuss."

I nod, turning away so that they won't see my fear. My hands are clenched at my sides.

The carnival spins around me, spitting burnt sugar and potato grease into the summer night. Preteens laugh at bawdy jokes, ducking into kissing booths for a first taste of romance, then ducking behind them for an encore. I make my way around the fair, picking at a wad of cotton candy. Even so, wherever I go, the shadow of the Ferris wheel follows me. It dwarfs me. It threatens to swallow me whole.

I hear a shout, and I look up to see my friends getting into line.

"Aren't you coming?" they ask. I nod.

"In a moment." I point to my cotton candy.

They shrug their shoulders, returning to a heated discussion of whose top is the most revealing. Marcella wins the dubious prize.

I eat my treat slowly, trying to make it last. Each bite melts in my mouth, slipping from robust flavor to cottony nothingness almost immediately, almost before you know to savor it. Time after time this happens, but you never learn. Before you know it, the candy is gone.

High, high above me, a woman gives a shout. I instantly crane my neck, and I see a floppy hat floating downward. I shudder, touching my hair. Here it is: my greatest fear, now realized. The hat is like a white dove, trailing ribbons and silk flowers as it falls. For a moment, I think about catching it. I imagine hunching beneath it, opening myself to it, taking it into my arms. But then I blink, and the moment has passed. Yet another thing that I thought of doing and simply didn't have the time. Like with the cotton candy, I am too late. Only an unfulfilled promise remains.

My hands are now empty. Excuses are gone. My friends beckon me, and I climb into a car. It sways gently in the wind, reminding me that school will begin soon. They always come together: a cool

breeze, falling leaves, open textbooks. Turn to page seventy-eight and begin. Tell me about the Cold War. Who started it? Who ended it?

Who cares? The wind is rising now; we have started to move. We climb higher and higher, rocking more and more between the Ferris wheel's steel arms. Laughing loudly, maybe too loudly, into the night. And I, laughing loudest of all, clutching my head anxiously. My hand starts to sweat.

We are near the top now. The pace picks up. I feel an odd sensation in my stomach, and our carriage swoops. I instantly release my head, grabbing for the side of the cart. I steady myself, but a sudden lightness, sudden silence, tells me that something is wrong. No one will meet my eyes. The laughter has stopped. Twenty yards away, my wig, too, becomes a brown-winged dove. It drifts to the ground, haphazardly strewn with empty bags and cracked peanut shells. Just before it hits, it bursts into flight. But no one else sees it. They see it settle in the dust; I see it fly away.

We pass the next moments in silence. They are uncomfortable, not knowing what to do. Thinking about the odd absences. The bags that sometimes appear below my eyes. I, on the other hand, have never felt freer. For the first time, I can taste the cotton candy, really taste it, before it melts. I stand up, suddenly unable to stop laughing.

“Try it!”

They are doubtful; the carriage rocks dangerously. But I smile reassuringly, and my eyes tell them that it's okay. So slowly but surely, they, too, stand. As the carriage rises again, we are all swaying together, in one motion, laughing about the pimply kids in the kissing booths and the upcoming essays on Napoleon. We are all clutching the steel bar in the middle of the cart, watching the carnival become a twinkling map below us. I open my eyes, staring at the world. Staring at the invisible birds, taking wing on either side. I watch them go, cheeks damp with laughter, grip firm. I am no longer afraid.

Oh Lucky You

PROMPT: Oh lucky you

“Oh lucky you.”

I look up. I am incredulous. “Lucky me? You must be joking.”

We are sitting on the playground, watching a game of kickball. Louisa is squashed beside me, bleeding crystal and cashmere into the biting air. It is cold. All around us, the storm clouds threaten snow.

She shrugs. “You get to stay here. Friends. Family. The Christmas parade.”

I stare at her. “You're going skiing. In *Denver!* Christ! I've always wanted to go there.”

“Have you?” Louisa asks, doubtful.

I pause. “Well, no. I’ve never really thought about it. But hell, why not? Anything’s gotta be better than here.”

She nods. “Sure. That’s night.” And the conversation turns.

A week passes. Teachers hang up snowflakes, fastening them to windows and dusty chalkboards. At home, the Christmas stockings are uncovered. A pungent pine is dragged inside. We’ve lost most of the decorations, an accident involving water and mold and an attic that needs some repairs. What we have left are rudimentary and homemade, clashing horribly with the flickering lights that we’ve been meaning to replace.

I go over Louisa’s house. *Her* tree is tall and elegant, of course, fanning delicately across the marble floor. The ornaments are tasteful, all made of crystal and white porcelain. The white lights are intricately woven into the thick branches, apparently by a professional. The music, humming softly in the background, is exquisite.

A maid walks in, carrying a tray of snacks, blackcurrant scones and jam. We eat them slowly, careful that no crumbs fall onto the spotless floor. I nod at the tree. “It’s ya beaautiful.”

Louisa frowns. “What was that?”

I swallow my food. “It’s beautiful.” I pause. “Lucky you.”

She just nods.

More time passes. My mom buys an angel to be the treetopper. Naturally, we bicker over it. “It’s pretty!” she says, defending it.

“Too religious,” I reply.

“Too creepy,” says my sister, shuddering at the beady eyes.

“Too hard to hang,” says my dad, sounding tired.

I tell Louisa. She smiles. “Too cute.”

In the end, we settle on a penguin. It’s a stuffed one. His name is Herman.

“Herman?” Louisa asks, her eyes twinkling.

I nod. “My sister wanted a frog. My mom wanted a penguin. So, well, we decided on a penguin named Herman.”

Louisa laughs. “And what did your dad think?”

“He thought that it didn’t matter a whit, just so long as everyone would stop shouting.”

“And what about *you*?”

I shrug. “Well, I get to keep the penguin when we’re done. So it works for me.”

Louisa smiles. She’s wearing blue silk today. It matches her eyes and blonde hair perfectly. She’ll be getting more of it soon, since her mother has promised her a silk dress for the eighth grade formal. She says that it’ll be for Christmas. Lucky Louisa.

Soon it is the Friday before Christmas. The air is pregnant with anticipation.

“I’m gonna get an Xbox!” one kid brags.

“My dad’s taking me to a Bruins game.”

“My dad *is* a Bruin. He’s taking me to meet the team. Beat that!”

“You’re a liar. Your dad works at the hardware store. I’ve seen him.”

“Listen to this!” says another kid. “*My* family’s going to Disney.”

At night, we have the school Christmas pageant. Louisa has the leading role. In her gown and stage makeup, she looks beautiful. My dad takes pictures. “For the scrap book,” he says, smiling at me.

I roll my eyes impatiently. “Her dad’s got a professional photographer here. She doesn’t need anything that *we* could make.” Hearing this, he shrugs, but he takes the pictures anyway.

When I take the stage, enjoying my three minutes of fame while playing a giant lobster, I see the flashbulb clicking. Looking at my dad, I ham it up a bit. He loves it when I do that.

“Too bad you couldn’t have been a penguin,” my sister says after the show. She’s really into penguins now.

I shrug slightly, taking off my costume. “I like lobsters.”

As I say this, my plastic lobster claw—it’s about the size of a T-bone—clatters onto the floor. It’s a cheap thing that we bought at CVS. It cracks a little bit when it hits the ground. My sister seizes it, gripped with sudden inspiration. “For the tree!” she yells excitedly

I’m horrified. “No way! It’s a Christmas tree, not a wildlife refuge!”

My mother steps in. “*I* think that it’ll look lovely.”

I sigh, knowing that I’ve lost. A minute later, I see that Louisa’s standing nearby. As she watches us, she smiles.

“Hey,” she says lightly. “You were great.”

“Me? Great?” I laugh. “Louisa, I was a giant lobster. My biggest accomplishment was not turning into bisque.” I shake my head. “But *you*, you were a star! Congratulations.”

She nods. “Yeah. Thanks.” Then she shivers.

We’re standing outside just now, getting ready to start the lengthy, not to mention cold, journey to the car. We’re parked in a lot that’s several streets away, since my dad wouldn’t pay for parking. “Where’re your mom and dad?” I ask. “Did they run inside for something?”

Louisa shakes her head. “They couldn’t make it.”

I frown. “Oh.” I wait. It’s starting to snow. “Do you need a ride home?” I ask hesitantly.

She shakes her head. “My dad sent a driver. He’ll be here any minute.” She looks up. “There he is now.”

I nod, and so we part ways.

Then it’s Christmas Eve. We’ve just finished dinner, and my sister and I are bickering over what game we should play.

“Scrabble!” I say.

“Monopoly!” says she.

“We always play Monopoly,” I complain.

“Not so! We *never* play Monopoly.”

My dad shakes his head, hiding behind a newspaper. My mom is washing dishes. Then, unexpectedly, the doorbell rings. To my surprise, it’s Louisa.

“Hey.”

I blink. “Hey.” I frown. “Weren’t you supposed to leave today? For Colorado?”

She nods. “I, well, fell sick.” Saying this, she coughs feebly.

I grin. “So sick that you had to stay here?”

“Yeah,” she replies, grinning back. “Good thing I’ve got a friend who can take care of me while they’re away.”

I laugh, opening the door wider. “Thank God.”

The next day, a stack of presents, most wrapped in newspaper, are sitting underneath the tree. It seems that the magic of Santa Claus has returned. My sister shrieks with delight. A stuffed penguin of her own!

“I will call him—” There is a long pause. “Lobster!”

I shake my head. “A very confused child.”

Louisa grins. “A very *cute* child.” Then she reaches for Lobster. “Can I see him? Maybe we can introduce him to Herman.”

We look a little bit more, and I suddenly see that there’s a present for Louisa. She opens it. When she does so, she sees that it’s a scrapbook from the pageant. She swallows, falling strangely silent.

“Lucky me,” she says softly.

Sitting beside her, I shake my head, flipping it open to the first page. “No,” I say, my voice just as quiet. “Lucky us.”

The Dog Walker’s Girl

PROMPT: *Dog-walking*

CAPE COD. She was the girl on the striped towel, sunning herself in the growing twilight. Her legs were long and slender, showcasing toned calves and painted toenails. Her hair was an auburn slash against the milky sand.

He was walking straight toward her, four dogs tethered on a leash. His hair was a blonde halo in the setting sun. His eyes were a pair of blue crystals.

She watched him. She watched the frenzied gait of the canines and the boy's casual strides. Curling her toes into the powdery sand, she let him grow closer and closer.

"Anise?"

It was her mother calling her, brown hair and brown eyes, knit cardigan, queen of the Seven Minute Supper and family flybys of France and Italy. She was standing on the porch, holding her skirt against the sea breeze.

"It's Carla. She's on the phone for you."

Anise turned again toward the beach. The boy was still there, eyeing her, eyes blue like the sea behind him. For a moment, just a moment, she met his gaze. A second ticked by. Then two. Then three. And then, without another word, she turned away.

"I'm in love."

Anise and Carla were unpacking a picnic lunch, seated in a wooden gazebo overlooking Spores Garden. Beneath them, a sloping hillside, now strewn with lavender and forsythia, led toward a saltwater marsh.

Carla frowned, carefully examining her tomato and mozzarella sandwich. When she spoke, her voice was distracted. "Really? When's the wedding?"

"I'm being serious. It's for real this time."

"Who said that I was joking? Let's face it. Wedding presents don't just grow on trees. I need time to plan this shit." She paused. "Is there pesto on this? I told them not to. I hate that stuff."

"Take mine. I don't have any." With that, Anise paused slightly, watching Carla investigate whether the second sandwich bore any signs of the offending paste. "Aren't you at all curious?" Anise finally asked, impatient now.

"Curious?" Carla replied mildly. "Why, I'm beyond curious. I'm dying. What's his name?"

Anise shifted uncomfortably, now watching Carla stuff her face with red tomato and white cheese. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Carla asked, frowning slightly. When Anise remained silent, she nodded. "Well, okay then. What does he do?"

"He walks dogs."

Carla hooted. "Your mom is going to love this!"

Anise sniffed. "They're rich people's dogs. I've seen them. Nothing but thoroughbreds and golden labs."

"I see. Well, that's okay then. As long as he's classy about it all." With this, she pointed to the chocolate brownie that was lying between them. "Mind if I dig in first?"

Anise sighed, pushing it away. "Not at all."

PARIS. She was the girl at Le Figaro café, sipping a *courte tasse* of black espresso. In her hands, a blank postcard mirrored the scene that lay before her, a busy stretch of Rue de Rivoli, now teeming with determined shoppers and crêperies fat with Nutella. For a while, her pen hovered over the postcard, threatening time and again to land. But every time that ink met paper, a fit of hesitation would grab her hand.

Dear—

And there she would stop, the jerky motion causing the table to shake. Three years had passed. High school was almost over. Summers on the Cape would end soon.

She had still never learned his name.

NEW YORK CITY. She was the girl in the Cinderella gown, a fairy princess brought to life. Her hair was laced with tiny flowers, dripping down her back and slender neck. The church was a maze of candles and roses, its doors thrown open to the evening outside.

Her mother was in the front row, watching her with tender eyes. The candles burned a little lower. The music started. At the end of the aisle, her future husband smiled.

In her step, there was no hesitation. After all, these strides had been planned and rehearsed well, decades in the making.

Suddenly, just outside, a dog barked. It was a tiny sound, one that perhaps only she heard. And for a moment, just a moment, Anise faltered. She clutched her bouquet a little too tightly. She listened closely, her heartbeat slamming in her ears.

Then the moment passed. She carried on, sweeping up the aisle, toward the airy mansion and Seven Minutes suppers and European vacations that lay beyond. Not once did she look back.