

Truth in Lies

by Sarah Olson

The gallery has no coat check, which is, Allan thinks, hugely inconvenient. In fact, the gallery is just one bare room, with one stand-alone wall in the center and smooth concrete flooring, no nooks save for the hallway in the back that leads to the offices. Allan resigns himself to carrying his coat. This is disappointing: he wanted to have full use of his hands while he walked around, assessing Eddie's work. He wanted to be able to house his hands in his pockets, cross his arms, rub at his chin, gesture his enthusiasm. He would keep his jacket on, but he is wearing the sweater she bought him for their second Christmas, the one he doesn't like but is made of cashmere. It is a peace offering he can't afford to cover up, so he shoves his gloves down the sleeve of his winter coat and folds it over his arm.

Eddie's newest collection is two dozen paintings based on photographs, looking like photos until the viewer gets in close and can see the tiny imperfections that emphasize the larger technical skill of the piece. Allan is barely inside the gallery and he can already hear the murmurs of *Can you believe these are paintings* and *How does she do it, how on earth*. He falls into line with the rest of the well-dressed observers, all adopting the stooped pose of the art viewer, leaning towards the canvas. Temporary letters announce the title of the show, *Truth in Lies*, in an understated sans serif font on the stand-alone wall. The whole thing smacks of precisely Eddie's tastes, and Allan knows she must be incandescent with pride. This is a far cry from when she first housed her work in her aunt's coffee shop, which was "unbearably chintz," she would say, eyebrows moving up and down quickly and mouth quirking downwards, "but you do what you have to." This gallery, however, with its surplus of open white space and no lace in sight, is exactly what Eddie has been wanting for years. Allan knows she's somewhere in the crowd at this moment, feeling quietly and fiercely validated.

He does not seek her out, not now. It's better if she finds him, to be surprised and touched that he came, that he cares. And he does care, still, despite the fact that ten months ago he thought he didn't. He has already rehearsed his main points for this meeting: I'm sorry, it was a mistake, I miss you, I love you. He resisted the urge to mentally map a speech, using the careful language he has amassed as a technical writer, because she won't be impressed if it comes out contrived. She'll want to argue that emotion can't be memorized and Allan is frankly done with arguing. He wants her back, crazy and all, her breathless, huffing laughter and her cracking knuckles and her teasing and her art and all the things that unsettled and annoyed him about her, but now seem so necessary.

He's had time to think about Eddie and her ridiculous brilliance as he sits in his tiny apartment, completely devoid of clutter and sound. His neighbors are remarkably noiseless, except for occasional restive footsteps creaking above his head. Each apartment is its own nation state, communicating with each other in the form of smells, lingering in the stairwell and easily translated by all residents of the building. Someone ordered a pizza, someone is microwaving a

garlicky Lean Cuisine meal, someone spilled vodka in front of their door. Allan sits on his bed with its severe hospital corners and interprets these smoke signal messages of loneliness. He misses Eddie's smell of paint thinner and unpolished wood and her noise and her genius that he could never understand.

At the outset of their relationship, he thought perhaps she would become easier to fathom as time went on. He met her when he was dropping off his spare key with his friend Jen and picking up hers in return. Jen was then in medical school, occupying the old house that belonged to her grandparents, and was all about eating whole grains, sorting out residencies, and snapping at house guests to not touch the cat, please, he'll be irritable for hours. Eddie(-don't-call-me-Edna) was renting Jen's attic as studio space, and she touched the cat whenever she pleased. She scared Allan into stubbing his toe viciously on a kitchen chair when he went to help himself to an Izze and found her pouring a glass of organic orange juice instead. Jen, who had been sure to text beforehand to say she wouldn't be home and to remind Allan to leave her cat alone, had neglected to mention the resident artist, who was now eyeing him appraisingly through her long, almost colorless bangs. Eddie Holstiege was nonthreatening, almost birdlike, dwarfed in a men's denim work shirt over black, pilled yoga pants. Once he had handed over his name, toe still throbbing, and received hers in return, he found himself upstairs, examining her paintings. She needed a "fresh eye" and assured him that he'd do just fine.

Eddie's work at the time was all old-fashioned maps recreated on canvas, with toys from McDonald's Happy Meals hovering in the foreground. As was his wont, Allan forced himself to find good things to say. He hated lying, still does, and yet shied away from cold, critical honesty. Best to find things of which he approved and expound upon those, and Eddie's work was handled no differently. Allan was impressed by her technique, and said so – the maps might have been pasted on the canvas instead of painted, and the *Ice Age* characters and My Little Ponies were so lovingly detailed that it belied their cheap origins and inevitable resting places in county landfills. The idea was ludicrous, almost comically bad, but her technique was flawless, extraordinary, and so Allan left the premise of the pieces tactfully unmentioned. This was before she knew him well enough to know that this meant he had nothing better to say, so she was flattered. He was hooked.

He kept finding her at the crowded house parties he frequented. He was sure, with an uncanny feeling that brought the hairs on the back of his neck to attention, that she had been there before he met her, but it was only now, afterwards, that he noticed, that their eyes kept meeting from across the room. These mad get-togethers were always striving to be far more sophisticated than they actually were, and her smiles were curls of smoke above the rims of cheap wine glasses, whose only redeeming feature seemed to be that at least they weren't red Solo cups. Most faces were familiar at these parties, not just hers, and he found himself having the same conversations over and over again – *Hey, how are you, I'm Allan, how do you know Louis, oh, you went to undergrad together, I work with him, what is it you do?* Allan knew he'd already introduced himself at least once before to these people, as if last time was a read-through of the lines and now that they were memorized it could be brought to the stage. The knowledge that they didn't remember him was a sigh housed deep in his chest and a practiced ease in all his introductions and small talk.

But Eddie always remembered Allan. Her first response upon seeing him was always to exclaim, "Allan Radke, technical writer!" as if announcing him at royal court. Gone were the days of yelling to be heard at loud, juvenile parties, but Allan still found himself leaning in close to hear her better, to figure her out. He felt that she needed decoding, and he was absolutely sure he was in possession of the cipher.

Tired of standing in line to view the paintings scattered along the walls, Allan peels away towards the center of the room, towards Eddie's central work, the four by six foot canvas hanging on the stand-alone wall under the title of the collection. It is the petrified and distilled product of a camera flash, flooding a cheap, dark hotel room with light. The bed, with its rumpled linens and blue shadows, fills most of the painting, while the flash just touches the figure of a naked woman curled in an armchair by the far window. The light reflects off the painted glass, eerie in its perfection. The photograph from which the painting is derived is pinned next to the placard bearing the title (*Jasper*), and is slightly out of focus, so the painting too has an uncanny hazy quality. The light catches on dust motes instead of illuminating the woman in the armchair, whose bare thigh and shin bear much of the unforgiving light. Eddie's signature lines the bottom of the canvas, blurred and orange, a modified time and date stamp. EDDIE HOLSTIEGE

Allan doesn't like it, to be honest. The mussed sheets put him in mind of semen and secretions, and he doesn't understand why the naked woman has to sit in the back at all, except for shock value. Perhaps her literal vulnerability is meant to lend emotional weight to the piece, but it still seems jarring in its impassivity. The flash is harsh, the lack of focus unsettling, and yet Allan knows exactly why Eddie chose this piece to shine in the spotlight, the keystone of her collection. *Anyone can take a bad picture*, she whispers in paint and in placement, *but only I can make it art*.

Still, Eddie is going to want to hear that it's genius, that it's great, and he can't say that it is. He can only whisper along with the rest of the crowd, *I don't understand how she does it, she's so talented*. She'll instantly see through his approval of her flawless technique and his interested inquiries about the translation of the dust motes from mind to canvas, and her goodwill will vanish, and then what will have been the point of all this, really. Best to find something he can gush over genuinely. Casually, he retreats from *Jasper*, and wanders through the other pieces, trying to find a more defensible position.

Allan slips back into the line, further down the far left wall, away from the bottleneck of everyone grabbing a program. He weaves through the other attendees of Eddie's opening night: middle-aged women with beaded jewelry dripping from their necks as they bend to examine prices, their husbands turning a skeptical, appraising eye on the artist's lifework. Students with chunky glasses and pursed lips pick their way through the collection, having already decided to dislike it, probably before entering the gallery. Allan doesn't know how Eddie stands it, being judged so obviously. *He* may not understand her work, but he likes it, of course he does, and he likes Eddie. He wants her to succeed.

A cluster of students in their wooly socks and drab-colored peacoats moves on from the next piece and Allan slots in to take their place. He furrows his brow and registers that this is his desk from their apartment. His desk, with his tax returns on it: he was stubbornly, idiotically still doing them on paper. Midday sunlight slants across the crumpled forms. He was tired, frustrated,

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he had made a mess of it. His eyes dart down (How much is his past bureaucratic agony worth?) but the price placard is already gone – someone bought this? The thought shocks him out of his good-natured appreciation of Eddie's talent. Who would actually buy this? Where would they hang it? What was the point? Who would display this for others, saying, "Look, some stranger painted another stranger's tax returns, and I have the proof"? He wonders if the woman from *Jasper* knows that her stripped, graceless body is currently being displayed as a testament to Eddie's talent; would she feel the same unbearable heat spreading across the back of her neck as he does?

The desk had been in their living room, between the two windows that looked out into the building across the street. The desk chair had been too close to the coffee table, and he always had to be careful when he pushed back to get up, lest he jar the cup resting on the table and provoke a little angry noise from Eddie at the sloshed coffee. Their green corduroy couch flanked the coffee table, sagging but comfortable.

The woman living above Allan and Eddie had hearing problems, but loved *Jeopardy*, a combination that would have spelled madness for Allan if not for Eddie's characteristic brand of preposterous genius. Eddie decided, after watching Allan yank headphones over his ears every time he heard the woman turn on the television, that each time the theme song to *Jeopardy* was heard while they were both in the apartment, they would convene at the couch and play along with the game by sound alone. But – "And here's the twist," she informed him solemnly. "We're going to play it while having sex."

And they did. *Jeopardy Sex* became the sort of insane tradition Allan thought he would never have. Alex Trebek's voice would filter through the ceiling like a celestial mandate, and they would clamber onto the couch, Allan's lips on Eddie's earlobe and Eddie's hands on Allan's waistband before the categories were all announced. First person to forget the "what is" format loses. Last person to give a coherent answer wins. They spent most of their time laughing and always ended up squished together, sticky and arguing over who won.

There was one day, though, near the end, when "This. Is. Jeopardy!" thudded through the apartment and Allan flinched. It was too loud already. Eddie was looking for brown sugar, and every single cupboard in the kitchen was open. Allan had been spending the last half hour holding himself back from shouting that the sugar was always together, always in the same place, if it wasn't there, it wasn't there, it wouldn't be behind the liquor, it wouldn't be next to the condensed milk they never used, it just *wasn't there*. But Eddie wasn't even really angry about it, this was habitual irritation only, this opening and closing of drawers with increasing frequency, her smiling and cracking her knuckles the whole time. The idea of *Jeopardy Sex* was just another discordant note in the din, and he was supposed to be writing this microwave manual, making this technological jargon accessible for every idiot who would ever buy a microwave, and it suddenly seemed impossible to imagine anything ever seeming easy or understandable again.

Eddie's hand was on his shoulder and Allan realized that the only sounds in the apartment were Alex announcing the returning champion and Allan's own labored breathing. She considered his face carefully, and he couldn't meet her eyes.

"What is 'not today'?" She guessed in that wry, knowing manner she carried about her like a shawl against chill.

He smiled weakly and resented her silently for letting this pass so calmly. Later that night she would drift her hand down his chest, and he would respond, but it would feel like defeat.

Why did she have to paint the desk with the crumpled paperwork and the pencil cup from his parents and the noon sunlight splashed across his failure? It was just another shitty picture like all the others, pinned up in a self-congratulatory manner next to the finished product. The pictures all say, *Look what I can do!* Allan is unsettled by it. Allan doesn't see the point.

He veers off from the tax returns, glancing over the next five or six canvases, only registering painted blurs and deliberately faulty composition. A bowl of rotted fruit, a girl's skewed, failed selfie in the bathroom mirror. His arm is sweaty under the coat he's still holding: he switches sides and runs a hand down his face. He just needs to tell Eddie he was wrong. He just needs to say it was all a mistake. He doesn't understand her, but that's fine. You don't have to understand something to like it. You don't have to like all of something to love it. It isn't lying.

At last, he arrives at a painting at which he can make his final stand. It is small, smaller by far than most of the pieces that have preceded it, and comfortingly dark, entirely blue and black. It's a version of the central piece of the show, the cheap motel room with the nude woman, but in this version, there is no flash. It's softer, more muted, less painful; the woman's face is illuminated by the blue moonlight radiating from the window, her nose upturned, her lips wide. She has graceful shoulders in this painting, and her meaty thighs are left in shadow. This picture is sharply in focus, and the brush strokes of the painting are done in the manner of a miniaturist's careful hand. Allan slumps his shoulders in sympathy with the woman's loneliness. This painting makes him feel. He likes it.

"Allan?"

"Eddie!" He wheels around, and adjusts his hold on his coat. He supposes it's a blessing to have something to do with his hands. "Hi! I – The turn out is great, were you expecting so many people? It's a mad house in here."

She smiles a bit and tilts her head in consideration: good signs. She looks lovely, in a dress of navy blue brocade that he hasn't seen before, a fleur-de-lis pattern scrolling over the fabric in darting silver thread. Allan is struck by the reassuring thought that he really has missed her, and his knee-jerk reaction is to blurt, *Come back*. He reminds himself he has to build up the conversation before he asks her for coffee.

"It is crowded, you walked right past me in your hurry to see all the pieces," she says, and her mouth crowds together in a dryer smile. "I didn't expect you to come."

"Well, it was in the paper. I wanted to see what you were up to. What you had moved on to." Bad choice of words, back track? "The concept is so interesting, Eddie, I've never seen anything like it. I like this one especially." He gestures to the painting, *Jasper II*.

She laughs, "Yes, you've been standing there staring at it for about ten minutes. I thought you'd already be gone by the time I was done talking to the Nelsons. You seemed like you were in a hurry to get through the show, I couldn't believe you were still here." Her eyes are now narrow, her head cocked to the right.

She wants him to say he was trying to find one he liked. What's wrong with that, anyway? So what if he didn't like most of her collection? Whenever they went to museums, she would spend the entire time snarking about the exhibit, critiquing the artist, the subject matter,

the technique. The last time they tried, he ended up walking back to the entrance the way he came, while she continued through to the end of the show. He couldn't stand a second more of her commentary, and they met at the car for a stony ride home.

"None of them grabbed me until this one." He says, smiling, making an effort not to grit his teeth. He's come to make peace. She hadn't wanted him to leave in the first place.

"You know, I thought of you while I was painting it."

That could mean anything. That could mean, *I missed you*, or it could mean, *I've wanted to punch you in the throat for ten months*. After Eddie caught on to his habit of only commenting on positive truths as he found them, she snuck it into their lives as another avenue for the teasing she so liked to dole out. When he cooked, she would say that the mashed potatoes were perfect, not too long in the microwave, and the steak was perfectly seasoned. She would grin at him, chin balanced on her hand, as he tried to puzzle out what was wrong – was the meat over cooked? She hadn't said anything about the carrots; maybe they were soggy, inedible. She would always laugh before he got too worked up. She was only joking, she assured him. It was all fine.

"It's lovely," he says, looking at her. "It really is. You've done a wonderful job."

"Thank you."

"How have you been?" He asks earnestly, softly.

She opens her mouth, but all that comes out is a sigh. "Allan—" She starts, but is interrupted by her own laughter. "Oh, my God. You can't be serious."

When he left, he couldn't tell her why. He didn't want to sour the memory of their relationship any more than he already had. *Just tell me why, I only want to know why! You can't just do this to me!* She had yelled, and her face had been mottled by emotion, he had caught her off guard. She couldn't regain her composure. He had only been able to say that he was sorry, he was so, so sorry, she was great, she was fantastic, but he couldn't do this anymore. *I just need to go. This is awful, I know it's awful, but I just can't do this with you anymore.*

"Allan, look." Her voice is raw and cold, hands on a winter's night when you've forgotten your gloves and you spend the whole time you're outside regretting you didn't bring them. "Do you want the truth? You were wonderful to me. You were great in bed. You always gave me enough space. You never forgot the milk. Our relationship should have worked, but it didn't, and now it isn't going to. I would prefer it if you left. Thanks for coming."

He is only halfway through the show. He cuts through the crowd to get to the doors. He doesn't put his coat on. His hands are freezing.

Allan thinks about the pictures as he drives home from the gallery. No one would display those photos, those were the failures; they were the ones you squirrel away in boxes in the basement instead of situating in albums, they were the ones you upload to your computer and then decide not to post on Facebook. Of course Eddie would glory in showing them to the crowds, airing everyone's dirty laundry and getting praised for it. Look what I can do! He thinks of his bed in his apartment, still feeling new and stiff after ten months, swallowed up in a camera flash. A perfect plane of white, no wrinkles, no stains. He thinks of Eddie painting the two of them as a couple, as a blur, coalescing to form one swath of color with two smears for smiles. She should have painted them instead of his tax returns. That was the bigger failure.