

Out with the Light...

By Laura Madeline Wiseman

Pasha slipped into loose jeans, a baggy sweater, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. As she carefully applied silver eyeshadow and black mascara, she watched the fat brush pull over her eyelids and the dark wand nudge her stubby eyelashes out. She thought her eyes were her best quality; the only things worth looking at.

When she was in middle school, she plucked out her eyelashes on a dare. Her eyes appeared bare, puffy, and swollen and for a long time, they didn't grow back. No one said a word, not her sisters or brother, not her mom or even Bill. Pasha's dark hair was always in her face anyway and she wondered if she was a girl worth noticing.

Her fourteen-year-old younger brother annoyed her. Bill ordered her around. She would roll her eyes at Bill when he wasn't looking, sending her black eyelashes up and splayed against her lids. As soon as she could she'd slip away into her room, push her headphones onto her head and close her eyes. Inside herself was the only space just for her.

Bill was her mother's newest husband, if five years could be considered new. As a nurse, her mother was rarely around and when she was, often too busy and too exhausted to talk to her two youngest children. Bill, skinny, old, drunk Bill worked union and thus worked forty hours a week, always. He'd come home, find his place at the kitchen table and drink. This was his throne, with the tiny thirteen inch television blaring in front of his red eyes.

Pasha's chore had been the kitchen as long as she could remember. It was the perfect chore and no longer required any thought. She had a routine: find all the dishes, put the clean away, fill the sink, do the dishes, wipe counters and briefly sweep the floor. She preferred to clean right after school, before Bill got home, but didn't always make it.

When she didn't make it, she'd try to ignore the sounds of him: long swallows or boots scraping on the linoleum. He wouldn't exactly stare at her. He wouldn't exactly touch her. But he was there, rubbing the grayed stubble of his beard, running his dirty fingernails through his

thinned hair, and breathing that stale smell of alcohol. When the cans fell off the table, as they often did, the kitchen rang with the sounds of gunshots.

As Pasha marched to school that morning, she spit every few paces. She walked along the street and on the curb: one foot on the damp asphalt and the other on the ice. Spring was her favorite season, and loved the way snow melted and ran in the gutters. The black dirt of the street made rough ridges in the snow. In mornings, after the night had frozen the melted slush in the streets, it would begin to thaw from underneath as the blacktop warmed from the sun. Pasha loved to crack the ice, knock it down, and send it skittering along the water in the gutters.

Crush step, crush step, crush step, Pasha walked to school with an innocent smile. She pulled her fingers into the arm of her long sleeved shirt and spit. Inside the black shirt, she felt small, her skin clinging to the bone and tissue beneath. Her only coat was beyond dirty and they were out of detergent until next week. She has rinsed most of the vomit off, soaked it, but the smell still lingered. She wanted to kill Bill when she woke the next morning finding him and it in the kitchen, but it was her fault. She had left the coat near the kitchen table. It wasn't that cold anyway, Pasha told herself.

Pasha spit again, thinking of Jesse her friend. Jesse was different from her, richer, cooler, smarter, prettier and thinner. Not that Pasha cared much about weight before she met Jesse, but Jesse was as slim as a headless mannequin. Spit. Jesse was the kind of girl whose attention made everything else disappear. It didn't matter where they were, school or Jesse's house, Jesse's perfect golden hair and clear blue eyes would meet Pasha's and it felt like it was just the two of them.

Pasha would do anything for Jesse, so she spit. On pro-anorexia sites, Jesse showed her that spit had five calories. "I spat once an hour yesterday," said Jesse, "In a week, I should lose a pound."

Pasha did not think that Jesse had anorexia or bulimia; she was just preoccupied with weight, which was the thing that most normal girls worried about. And besides, it was exciting. Each new revelation, each new plan, each new item Jesse would swear off forever, only to come back a day or two later with an entirely new idea. The old goals previously made not to be spoken of or mentioned. Jesse didn't like to be reminded of her failures. Pasha watched her

closely: the way she let a cigarette hang on her lips, the way she'd wiggle the blades of her shoulders like wings trying to break through the skin or the way the flesh of her legs only touched at the ankles when she stood with her feet together. Jesse seemed to not fit her body; it was too big and she herself was too small. Pasha was never able to see the difference in pounds or fit of clothing that Jesse expounded on daily, though Pasha said she did.

When she stepped on the scale, Pasha always weighed the same: 125. It didn't matter if her hair was wet or dry, she was naked or clothed, if she had her period or not. It was always 125. But this she used to her advantage, she would claim she tried Jesse's new diet and nothing. She was hopeless. She was doomed to always be 5'8 and 125 pounds. Pasha could never remember ever weighing more or less. Her body was a mystery to her, being revealed by Jesse, so it seemed. Pasha had long dark brown hair that perpetually looked damp and fell over her eyes and she didn't even consider her appearance, until Jesse told her she was beautiful.

At school, Pasha avoided the halls and walked around the building until she came to the door just outside the art building. Art was the first two classes of the day, study hall and first year art. With the radio on and a table to herself, Pasha slipped into class and opened her journal. It was not a journal in traditional form, with "dear diary" scrawled across the top. It rarely had any words in it at all, though it was full of sketches and doodles, arrows linking pictures together.

Pasha liked to imagine that her life was linked together by arrows that she couldn't see, but were there: an arrow from her mother and Bill to her; a line connected her to school, to art class, to Jesse; an arrow to the neighborhood boys and a red arrow to her brother; arrows to teachers; a broken arrow to all her older sisters who had moved out, gone to college, married, left and never visited. In one section of the journal she sketched the bodies of teachers secretly for Jesse. In the drawings, she would outline all the flaws, with tiny arrows pointing to large chocolate candy butts, ham hock calves, chicken necks, ripply upper arms, and tumor-fed bellies. She thought, someday she would paint this "Arrow World" and dedicate it to Jesse.

Besides her mother, Pasha was the only girl left in her family by the time she reached fifth grade, which was probably why the neighbor boy, Shane, bullied her all the way through middle school. She had no protectors then, only her younger brother and he didn't count. When she thought of Shane, her shins ached, where he'd kicked them when she didn't play right, when

she reminded him that she was a girl. Pasha imagined that there were arrows to the maroon scars on her shins, but tried to ignore them. Shane had gone away, so why couldn't the old wounds? Pasha wore long pants to cover the disfigured skin to convince herself there was nothing there. No club house. No initiation. No memory.

The journal was part of the requirements for first year art students. The art teacher was not typical for a teacher, Pasha thought. Ms. Regicide had red flaming hair and wore green or blue. On the first day of school, she wrote on the board, "If you think art is vanity, prove it. If you think vanity is art, buy it. But if you are not sure what art is, then you are in the right room." Pasha couldn't prove anything and her family had little money, so she must be in the right place. If only Jesse would try to understand this, Pasha thought.

Behind Ms. Regicide's desk hung a large mirror framed in gold plaster curlicues. If students went to her desk, she would watch how many times they looked in the mirror and how many times they looked at her. Sometimes during class with eyeliner and a mirror, Ms. Regicide would chalk circles around her eyes. Then she'd look up and around at her students, one eyebrow arched like royalty. She painted herself as much as she painted on paper. Pasha liked her because she did not deny her obsession, but lived it every moment. An obsession was something to devote a lifetime to. Pasha imagined that the art teacher had several mirrors in her house, each with a different angle of her razor eyebrows and her emaciated body.

This morning the art teacher stood on top of her desk, carefully flicking a paintbrush against her smock. As a teacher, she was always challenging the students to see the world in a new way, to create the world in an individual manner, and to combine objects to explain something no one else wanted to say. Though Pasha kept a distance from the teacher, she found her mesmerizing. Ms. Regicide knew so much she was like a god. When the teacher stood over Pasha to give suggestions on her work, Pasha immediately did exactly what Ms. Regicide said. When Ms. Regicide critiqued her work, Pasha believed every word as truth.

Today, Ms. Regicide was announcing the last assignment for the semester. "Your final project for the year is going to be mixed media. As I come around, I will give you each four cards. Each card has something written on it. You must incorporate all four of these cards into your final project," she said as she pulled from her green art smock a stack of small blue cards.

Hopping down from the desk, Ms. Regicide made rounds of the room passing out the slips of paper.

Pasha waited anxiously, doodling in her journal and not even touching the cards when they were placed on her paint-stained table. When the teacher was well past, Pasha snatched them up and quickly laid them on her journal, the words face up. The four cards read: fire, death, nature, and smell.

Without warning, images of Shane filed into her head.

It was not the first time he had done it, the third or the last; it was more of a ritual, as Pasha now understood it. She had gone to therapy for it, but her family couldn't afford appointments consistently, let alone medication. Pasha had a list of all the diagnoses which were placed on her from one physician or another: manic, extreme depression, bi-polar, multiple personality disorder, mild schizophrenia, and bored. Often, she was prescribed drugs or her parents were told that brief institutionalization might help. However, in all cases the money couldn't be raised.

Back then Shane was her best friend, sometimes he was her boyfriend. They had a club house, where occasionally other kids were invited to join. The club was along the riverbank, in flood land. Every spring, the area was covered in river water, the treetops reduced to shrub size in the rushing current. But for the most part of the year, the land was dry and Shane and Pasha spent hours in the club house.

Shane decided that because the club was in a secret place, they had to have secrets that only they shared. On their legs, Shane carved long horizontal lines, which later became maroon scars. When they healed, he added new lines because it proved something about his own power over life and his powerlessness. This is how he explained it to Pasha. Shane figured he could do things, cut his body or make a club, but never could control the exact outcomes, how fast to healing or when the riverbank would flood. To make the lines, he would do himself and then he would do her. It was done quickly with a broken piece of glass, slashing on her out stretched leg, knee to ankle. Tears were proof of initiation and later, lack of tears the preferred expression. Near them, grasshoppers would ping into the air, the brown water swirled as if boiling, and the whine of the cicadas grew louder as the afternoon moved into evening.

It was the river water that bothered Pasha the most and why she refused to go back there once her family moved to the other side of town. Inside that cauldron of depthless water, tides pull her into a memory she can't remember. The first psychologist, nodding in understanding, had told Pasha that she was hiding something. Whenever Pasha crossed a bridge since the move, she slammed her eyelids together and focused on the cuts on her legs. The bridge made them ache and sometimes she'd see slivers of a body, etched with lines.

Shane fit perfectly for the final assignment for art class, thought Pasha. But he was gone, anyway. She needed a new subject; she had a new subject, Jesse. How does one know when she's finally accepted, when she's okay, when her best friend will never leave them? she thought. Pasha sketched ideas in her journal, dreams she recently had and images she found fitting. But mostly, she drew her own name over and over the faint sketch of a girl. By the end of class, she had a plan.



Jesse hid behind the gymnasium smoking cigarettes and waited for Pasha to get out of art class for their track and field third period they had together. She was already dressing for gym, having missed the first two hours of school. After showering and fixing herself up, she had slid her body into her favorite dark blue sweatpants and college sweatshirt. One single ribbon held her ponytail in place.

Jesse inhaled and exhaled like a mirror image of the beautiful women in the movies. Leaning against the cool brick of the building, she imagined someone else watching her with envy. In her mind, she saw some nerdy band kid approach her. Practicing her laugh out loud, Jesse thought of fitting comments for such an interaction. Her real laughter rang in the warming day. What Jesse wanted was perfection: to walk from home to school and arrive absolutely without flaw. If she could only wear the right clothes, be at the right weight, and say the right things. But she didn't know how. That was the problem, but she didn't plan on telling anyone this. Squishing the butt into the grass, Jesse watched the art door for her friend.

Jesse did not do extra-curricular activities. She did not do sports or band, cheerleading or choir, nor did she have any desire to start now. School was not her life, nor would it ever be. She

worked as a waitress in a posh restaurant downtown. Her father landed her the job through a friend of the family, though Jesse had never seen this friend before. When Jesse showed up the first day, the manager, Brad, took her into his office and carefully examined her. He told her: no jewelry, nothing too tight or too low. “You are the youngest staff, but I do not want the clientele knowing I employ high school students. You are to act like a professional,” he said. Then he made her go home and put on a correct uniform: black bottoms and a button-down long-sleeved white dress shirt. Jesse was relieved he didn’t ask her what grade she was in, but knew she could pull it off. She might be fourteen, but already had a world of knowledge.

Because of her job, Jesse rarely made it to school on time the days after she worked the night shift. This annoyed her parents and affected her grades, but the money made her delirious. Every plate on the menu was at least twenty dollars and the business men who came in with pretty business women, left thick tips. The women disregarded her. The men, called her honey, sweetie, or miss. On the weekends when Brad the manager was not working, Jesse would wear knee length skirts with nylons. When the nylons had tiny runs in them, she got bigger tips. Jesse gathered her customers liked their servers a little trashy.

As Pasha approached her, Jesse felt pity for her friend. She did not understand why Pasha refused to use her potentials. She is a project, a fixer-upper, Jesse thought spitting. How could anyone stand to dress like that, wear clothes with frayed sleeves or walk with her head down? The world appreciated women who smiled and looked others in the eye, Jesse knew. Jesse also knew just the way to wear her shirts, so the tiniest gap would appear between the buttons. If you don’t use it, you lose it, Jesse thought as she eyed her friend’s breasts knowing they were there, somewhere.

Jesse considered herself a connoisseur of procedures to change the body and saved most of her tips from work, knowing it would come in handy eventually. With apt attention she’d watched an obese woman get her stomach stapled on the medical channel. She had watched liposuction, tummy tucks, breast implants, and face restructuring. She knew pills and powders, machines and programs. Every item promised transformation in a few short weeks. How long was a few short weeks, Jesse wondered.

On a video once, she had watched someone with her mouth wired shut. Another woman in a commercial stood motionless like a disgruntled scarecrow, with thick black thread connecting lip to lip. At work, when older beautiful women came in, Jesse tried to guess what they had had done and how much it had cost. She couldn't imagine that anything was a given, every ounce of perfection had to be earned. Jesse knew this to be true, every day she fought a war with herself. In a cartoon she had seen long ago, a cat swallowed starch which resulted in an immediate pin prick mouth. Jesse wanted a pin prick mouth, but with large full lips. When she licked starch carefully to avoid too many calories, nothing happened. Then she ran for half an hour, no use gaining weight by experiment.

As they rounded the track for the second time, Jesse began her daily work on Pasha. "Whatever is art good for?" said Jesse, as Pasha and she sped walked the mile for gym class. The only people who ran the mile were athletes and fat girls. Everyone else walked. Jesse could run the mile in under eight minutes, but she wouldn't dare do it now. She'd mess up her hair. She'd smell. Running was for nighttime, for ducking in the bushes and hurling the supper that her parents forced down her throat. And besides, she didn't want anyone to know really about her private crusade.

"City art is only good for defacing. Museums are for old people," said Jesse, Pasha making non-committal responses. "Art is for morons."

"I'm only taking it because I have to. Anyway, who cares? I think I lost a pound today," said Pasha, stopping to tie her shoe.

"No, you didn't."

"Yep. I think it was all the spitting I did this week. You were right, it's working like a charm."

"Well, good," said Jesse, changing the subject to the fifty dollar tip she got from the guy eating dinner alone the night before. Her mind shifted as she told her story, thinking two things at once. She saw the office, her name on the schedule as the closing server. The dull annoyance she had felt, knowing she'd have to remind Brad again that her parents did not want her to close on school nights.

After gym they headed their separate ways until lunch, which they had together. Pasha went to English. Jesse went to earth science. Instead of listening to the teacher, Jesse wrote notes. She wrote notes in school books, though never her own. Next to women scientists, she made quotation bubbles that said “I am fat, just like you.” Jesse imagined that she could change them all and knew that anyone could be as thin as herself, if they only had the courage to try. But they didn’t. Everyone was happily, disgustingly, fat.

When she showed her word bubbles to Pasha, they exchanged a secretive smile. Jesse knew she had a good sense of humor because she could laugh at herself and make everyone believe she was laughing at them. Sometimes after a joke, Pasha had a hurt look in her eyes, which only made Jesse laugh harder. Pasha had so much to learn and it wouldn’t be fair to tell her, she’d just have to show her.

Jesse also wrote notes in the matchbooks that she stole from work. The messages said: “I eat to live, but I don’t live to eat,” “Less is better,” “Those who saw her eat a tiny salad were very happy,” and “Burning and burning.” She would pass them to friends or waitresses as a joke. If someone gave her a strange look, Jesse would say, “Just helping you out,” make some comment about the way that person looked, and then quickly made her exist with a laugh. Jesse also left them in her locker, her pocket, and her purse. When she went to smoke behind the gym or the restaurant, she would read the lines like mantras.

As Jesse sat through her next class of world history, she carefully picked the dirt out from under her fingernails and thought of Brad. He’d come up behind her several times over the last few months, one hand firmly on her side and the other directing her attention to some flaw in her work. She knew what he wanted, but wasn’t ready to give it up yet, though she knew she would eventually. He had told her three weeks ago that he’d been watching her.

“Fantastic,” she had said, “you and every other man in this restaurant.”

“Uh-huh,” he fingered his slightly graying beard, “No, your tips, honey. If I catch you under-claiming, I’ll fire you.”

“Yeah, okay,” she’d said, walking away from him and throwing that laugh behind her.

As she tapped her pencil on her desk, she wondered why she didn’t expect it sooner and bit the inside of her cheek for imagining it would have been better than it was. That it would

have been something. Not to say Jesse wasn't experienced, she'd been having sex for almost two years now with boys near her age. She'd never slept with someone older.

When he'd pushed her into the office and began pulling at the buttons of her shirt, she'd quickly gone for his fly. Jesse wanted to help him out, getting this initial sexual encounter out of the way, so there could be more, so the romance could begin. But when she'd reached for his fly, he pushed her hands out of the way. And during, instead of concentrating, she kept seeing him push her hands away again and again. It was over so quickly, Jesse didn't even have a chance to fake it.

"You make a lot of noise. I'm always worried I'm too noisy," he said not smiling but with an edge of boredom in his voice. He carefully zipped up. He barely even removed his clothes, Jesse thought, though she sat mostly naked on his cool metal desk. She sat there confused a minute more, sensing something behind his words that she was missing. Some joke, or some insight that she had obviously overlooked. Immediately, she had an urge to pull inside herself, to shrink down, to hide as she blushed.

"Oh, sorry," Jesse said, "Nobody's here though."

Brad had the cash draw and began the night out count. His fingers ran through the checks and money, the change neatly filed in the ledger. He leaned over his work, his shirt expensive, which reminded Jesse how she knew he had cultivated that look: money and power. Jesse looked at the room around her, feeling like there were two layers of reality and she could only see one. The room contained a calendar with perfect servers smiling, a framed picture of wife and kids, and a fake plastic plant that needed dusting. It all seemed wrong. Maybe I should clean in here, thought Jesse.

"You were noisy, too," Jesse said finally, trying to laugh. Both the comment and laugh went unnoticed by Brad. He didn't even watch her dress or compose herself. And she felt somehow that he wasn't really talking about her sounds, but about her. Raising her hand to her hair, she felt to see if it was still in place. She knew her clothes were clean, or had been, before the night ended. And she did not smell, at least not that she could tell. Yet he was telling her something, something vitally important.

Jess struggled into the last bit of her clothes. Leaving the room, she'd wadded her light jacket and punched out, which she'd forgotten to do earlier. In her hurry, Jesse did not write down her tips. A faint smell of cooking oil hung around her while the thick warm scent of Italian food wrapped around her neck. It was just past midnight and her father did not like her out so late on a school night.

As she passed by Brad's office again, she said, "Good night," immediately wondering if she'd said it too loud. Bringing her knuckles to her lips as if to remind herself of something, Jesse stumbled into the night. As her fingers slid her car key into her parents' car, her school/work permit securely in her wallet, shrill laughter sounded in the air. As she listened, Jesse was unsure from where it came.

Δ

In Jesse's bedroom, Pasha lay on the bed, flipping through her sketch book with the four words of the new assignment rattling around her head. Jesse tried on clothes in front of her mirror. The mirror was cracked in several places and had been the mirror from her mother's bathroom. When she redecorated, Jesse begged for the large mirror. Tilted against the wall, it reflected most of the bedroom, though it was only four feet tall and six feet wide. "Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the skinniest of them all?" said Jesse glaring at herself and daring the mirror to talk back.

"How do you draw smell?" Pasha asked, as Jesse slipped into a small sundress. As usual, Jesse did not hear Pasha. When Jesse communed with the mirror, she heard very little. Her body was center stage and it had to look just right.

"This used to be my dress. I lost six more pounds. It keeps burning and burning. You should really try the aerobic videos with me, an hour twice a day is awesome. What?" Jesse threw off the dress, and pulled on a pair of red shorts. Sucking in her stomach, she buttoned them perfectly. Her legs were twigs.

"Does nature have to have nature in it? The outdoors are stupid, like gym class," said Pasha as the family cat jumped onto the bed.

“What?” said Jesse, as she eased out of the shorts and pulled out her cherry swimsuit. Pile of clothes lay around the room in little heaps, like bodies on the roadside.

Jesse continued, “Cross-country/Track team starts practices next Monday. We should go. We could dress like my older brother does for the wrestling team with layers of clothes and not drink a drop of water. We could even run in garbage sacks.” Jesse turned around and around in the mirror, the bikini cups were two stop signs. The bottom, a cry for help.

“Can death be anything other than the gothic: skeletons, bats, coffins, vampires? Can a spoon be death? Can death come through a tube or along a piece of glass?” said Pasha.

“I need to lose more. My thighs look like death.” Jesse pouted and turned to face Pasha with a grimace.

“Come here,” said Pasha, “Let me have a look at them. Surgery is really the thing now. Besides, incisions are best on young flesh.” Pasha winked at her friend.

Jesse collapsed on the bed in giggles, laughing each calorie away. “Do you think the fat girls do this too? Prancing and squeezing into clothes in front of their mirror? I bet they do. I bet they cry or pretend they’re a beauty queen. Can you imagine?”

“Be dead,” said Pasha, “I need your help on an art project. I’ve got the camera.”

“You would come if I died, wouldn’t you?”

“Only if it’s for the art class.”

“You would. You would cry, because I am your only friend.”

“Dead people don’t talk.”

“Okay,” said Jesse, staring at the ceiling, unblinking, imagining she was sliding into an operating room. Pasha wanted the eyes to be glassy, but they were watering.

Pasha pulled from her backpack a box of markers, a camera, and a sliver of glass. Snapping shots of the body, Pasha repositioned Jesse in various poses before she was satisfied. Her body was supine, as if sleeping or waiting for surgery. The red bathing suit lay loose on Jesse’s frame.

“Pasha, am I dead this time? This isn’t going to be some weird sexual murder art thing is it? Are you going to tie pantyhose around my neck?”

“No. You’re going in for plastic surgery, stomach stapling, and lipo-section. It’s a three-for-one deal. I’m not sure if you will come out yet. Be quiet or you might really die.”

The only sound was red ink on flesh.

Pasha drew arrows on Jesse’s thighs. Long hoops of light, marked the natural curves of Jesse’s skin. Skin was a record of life; it showed time, power, and money. Only the very rich or the very young had flawless skin. The young had to starve. The rich fed doctors money to look serially twenty. The result was the same: a colony of matchsticks with hair like a flame and bodies so thin they could ignite.

Pasha drew lines like a doctor planning the incision. “Good night, sweet patient, I’ll make it all better.”

With a blue marker Jesse’s waist became small, her belly button a jewel on a tiny band of white. Pasha etched out the ribs, making the groves deeper, the shadows enhanced by the inhale. Hipbones like shells, she colored fuchsia and scooped forward, jutting. The pelvis behind only a curtain of flesh criss-crossed with emblems and directions only Jesse and Pasha understood. On the back, the spine was refined into black steps, a thousand of them running up and down, over and again, burning and burning.

Pasha made her shoulder blades into angel wings of gray and like razors they cut and re-cut the ribs open. Blood trickled like calories away and away. Her arms became reeds, they did not flute or make bars, but were soft, compliant and hollow; for whom, they did not know. The green buds at the knuckles were laced with mold. Her palms were strawberries inside cages, to smell, but never to touch or taste. The seeds were mirrors that reflected nothing.

Pasha laced Jesse’s lips with black wire to sew them shut. A purple pin prick was for the straw that could only drink water. Her eyes were circled with coal and her hair divided into cherry slices. Jesse was a skeleton in a red bikini.

When Pasha was done, she had used the four items on the yellow paper: nature, fire, death, and smell. The stop signs were now lost inside arrows to cut out, to dismember, and to get rid of what was not needed. Pasha looked into the eyes of her friend and saw nothing but stubby lashes. Jesse was silent pieces. Picking up the camera and the sliver of glass, Pasha waited for

just a moment and then finished her project. Down Jesse's legs Pasha wrote twice, "Less is Better."