Decay

She had always wanted nothing more than to create: painted canvases that radiated color vibrant with emotion, words so thick of meaning that one couldn’t help but feel it stab into their heart, a legacy so profound that her life did not feel like such a waste.

Her creations were her dearest children, glittering accomplishments that earned her national acclaim and respect. She became the shining star, the buzzed-about artist, more than just a quiet woman.

But—as much as her creations were admired—she lost her grip on happiness, and subsequently, reality.

Happy sanity would come to stay, of course, but like a beautiful butterfly it would fly away, gone until the next warm season. Her colors painted stories of strong passion and undying devotion, but where in her real life could that be found? Nobody stayed around long enough to understand her mind or heart. The absence of warmth would cause her to spin out, to disappear for long periods of time, only to return with smudged makeup, protruding ribs, and her newest critically acclaimed work of art.

Fans, friends, family—everyone she knew ignored the signs of decay, pretending instead that her success was the glue that could hold her pieces together. Beauty was easier to see, and the absence of happiness was an issue too sticky to deal with.

She did not know if she was damaged or unlucky, so she created art that was pure in a way she never felt she could be. Her idealistic worlds filled the gaps in her own.

Or at least, they tried to.

Before long, words and color no longer sufficed. Even the respite her art provided was becoming dull. Her already short list of reasons to wake up in the morning was decreasing.

For many, Christmas Eve was proving to be a delightful day of overindulging, family, and holiday lights dancing off a snow-covered city. But for her, it was a night of loss. Another partner left, and none of her family would pick up her calls. They were too deep in the eggnog and high off anticipation for what was beneath the shiny wrapping under their Christmas trees.

Now she was on a needle’s tip, one tiny movement from tumbling into the abyss of permanent disassociation.

She left her apartment and wandered the streets, chilled fingers driving her towards a small grocery store. It was shocking the place was open, and she was curious if the worker inside was just as miserable as she was.

Agitated footsteps carried her into the empty aisles of the small grocery. She aimlessly browsed, picking up a liter of lemonade out of obligation. The girl at the counter had been keeping an eye on her, and she knew it was time for her wandering to take her home.

“Hi,” the young cashier said. “Is this all? Nothing special for the holidays?”

She only shook her head, too embarrassed to elaborate.

“Christmas isn’t always as jolly as we would like,” the cashier said as she scanned the lemonade. She couldn’t be older than eighteen. “Are you doing all right?”

A shrug was her eloquent response. She wasn’t used to people caring, let alone strangers in the city.

“It’s okay if you aren’t.”

She handed the cashier five dollars.

The girl bagged her item and returned her change. Sitting on top of the change was a business card with a dog printed on the front. “People can be overrated. Family doesn’t have to be complicated— or human. Everyone could use a companion.”

“I—have a nice night,” she whispered.

She wandered the streets a little longer, giving the lemonade to a vagabond sitting alone against a brick wall. His toothy smile of appreciation had too many gaps, and it made her even more sad. Before she knew it, she was standing in front of the pet store printed on the business card.

The building lights were still on.

That night, she didn’t go home alone. Her house was now home for two.