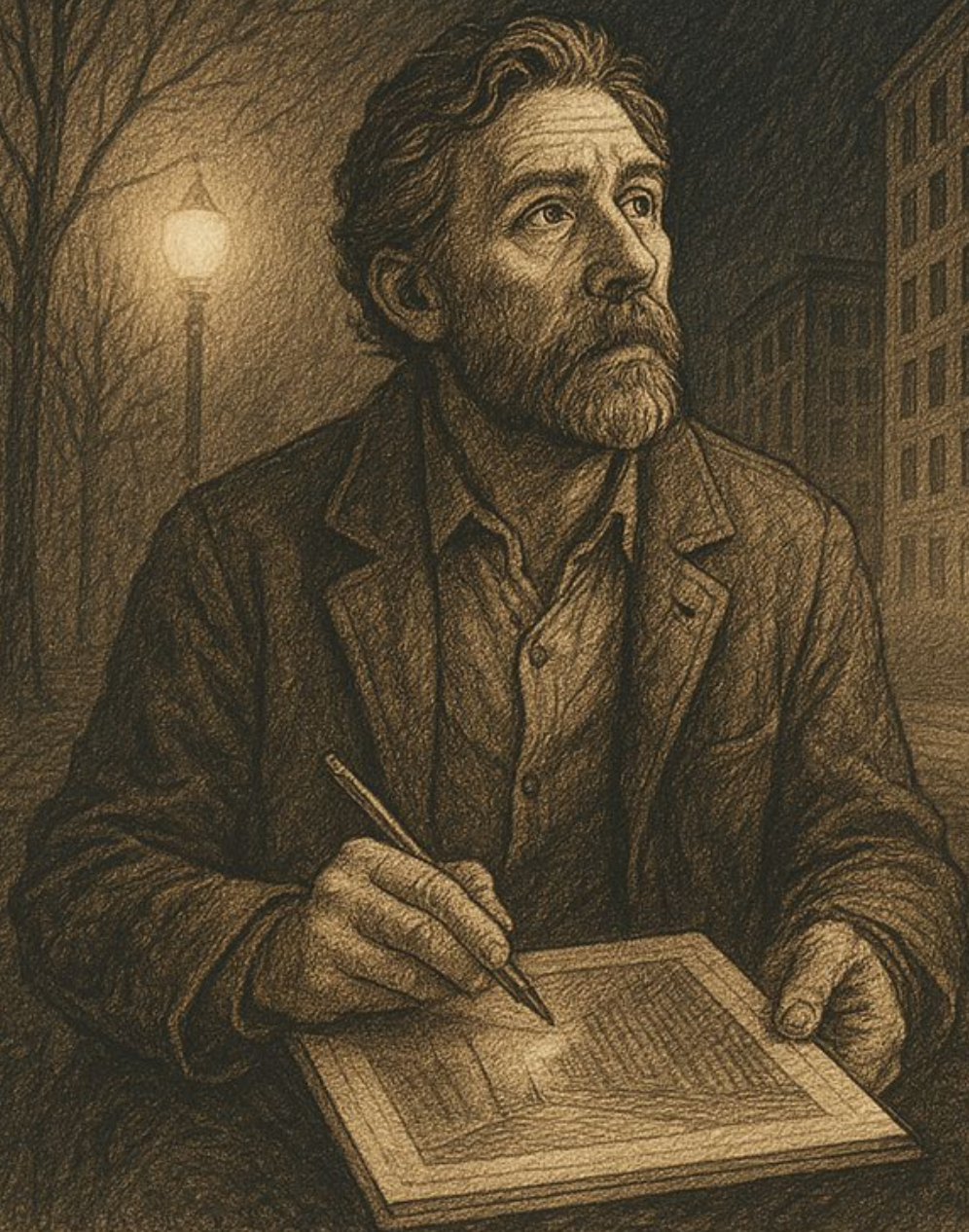


THE LINE AND THE LIGHT



He sat on the bench near 12th and Main where the streetcars used to run. The lines were still in the concrete, silver in the sun, but no one remembered them. They looked like scars.

He had the paper. He had the pen. The pen was old. The nib was worn, but he liked it that way. It had drawn a hundred things and ruined most of them. The satchel beside him held others. Pages curled and creased. Some torn. Some half-finished. The ink bled through on some. He kept them all anyway. The light came down hard through the glass on the high buildings. It was the kind of light that made edges sharp and gave you nothing for free. He liked that too. It made you earn what you saw.

Across the street, a woman stood with a boy on her hip. The boy was asleep. His mouth was open and the weight of him pulled her sideways. A little girl stood beside her. The girl held her hand tightly but looked straight at him. She didn't smile. Children don't smile when they don't know they should.

He uncapped the pen. The wind shifted the paper, and he caught the corner with his thumb. She had a face like Anna's, the same narrow mouth and the same tired eyes. Not the color, no. But the tiredness was the same. She looked both ways, then stepped into the street with the children. The boy didn't wake. The girl looked back once and then didn't again.

He drew fast. The pen scratched across the paper like a match being struck. The shape of her shoulders. The bend in her spine. The girl's stare. The boy's open mouth. Nothing else. No background. No building. Just them. He didn't think about it. If you thought, it was wrong. If you tried, it showed. You had to see it and let the hand move. The rest was lying.

They reached the far curb and were gone. He sat back. The paper trembled in his lap. The drawing wasn't good. Not in the usual way. But it was something. It had weight. It made him feel the way he had felt the day Anna told him she didn't want to be remembered sick. And then laughed like it was funny.

He folded the paper and slid it into the satchel. It was the first thing he had finished in six weeks. He lit a cigarette and leaned back against the bench. The smoke went up toward the sky but disappeared before it reached the edge of the buildings. He watched the light shift. You could never hold it. You could try, but it moved. It always moved. And then he stood up and walked away.

The winter was long that year. The kind that comes early and stays late. The kind that makes the walls sweat and the windows ice from the inside. The kind that kills old pipes and old people. They lived in a loft near the West Bottoms. It had big windows that didn't keep out the cold and a radiator that clanged like it was angry about being alive. The floor was wood, dark and uneven. She liked it. Said it had soul. He didn't know what soul meant, but he liked how she said it.

Anna moved slow that winter. She said it was the weather. Said it was nothing. But she coughed at night and her hands shook when she made tea. She had thin fingers and dark hair that curled when it shouldn't. When she smiled, it was like she knew something you didn't.

He tried to draw her. He sat on the bed with the paper on his knees and she sat in the window in her old coat with a scarf around her neck. The scarf was red and frayed at the ends. Her breath fogged the glass.

"You're watching me like I'm a bear in a cage," she said.

"I'm trying to get it right."

"You never will."

"I know."

She smiled and turned her face a little. The light came in across her cheek. There were hollows there now, under the skin. He didn't draw those. He left them out. The lines came too tight. The pen scratched wrong. The tilt of her head looked forced. The eyes were wrong. Too sad. Or not sad enough.

She looked over at the page.

"That's not me," she said.

"I know."

"You draw better when you're not trying so hard."

He didn't answer. He put the paper down and turned it over.

"Come here," she said.

He went and sat beside her in the window, and she leaned against him. Her body was warm but small now. She used to be stronger. She used to grip his wrist when she laughed, and it hurt. Now she just held his hand.

"You're too careful," she said. "Draw like it's the last thing you'll ever do."

"Maybe it is."

"Then make it count."

They sat there a long time. The radiator clicked but gave no heat. Outside, snow fell in thin, sideways lines.

He didn't draw her again for weeks.

He took the sketch to the gallery on Baltimore Avenue. The one with the tall white walls and the silver desk where no one sat for long. They hung quiet things there. Things that looked like they meant something.

The gallery man was named Reynolds. He was always dressed like he was going somewhere better. He had sharp eyes and slow hands. He looked at the drawing and nodded.

"This is good," Reynolds said.

"It's a sketch."

"It's honest."

The artist said nothing.

Reynolds tapped the corner of the paper. "There's something in her face. The way the weight pulls her. That's what I mean. It's not posed. It just is."

The artist looked down at the drawing. He saw the line where her coat curled against her hip. The boy's open mouth. The girl's stare. He saw the empty space behind them where Kansas City should have been but wasn't.

He said, "It's not right."

Reynolds smiled, too confident. "It doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to be true."

"That's not what I said."

"You should bring more."

The artist folded the paper and put it back in his satchel. Reynolds watched him like a man watches a dog who won't sit.

Outside, the sky was gray but not soft. The kind of gray that gets into your eyes. He walked north. The sidewalk was cracked, and the shop windows were filled with dust. In

one, a woman's dress hung on a mannequin that had no arms. He looked at it for a while. At home, he opened the box in the closet. The sketches were stacked like dirty plates. Old work. Years of it. Anna in spring. Anna in the chair. Anna holding her knees with her back against the wall.

He sat on the floor and went through them. Page after page. The lines were soft. Careful. None of them laughed. He took them out behind the building. The alley smelled like wet paper and old cigarettes. He used the Zippo Anna had given him. The one with the little etching of a crow on the side. She said it looked like him. The pages caught quick. The flames were bright and clean. They curled the paper in silence. The wind blew ashes down the alley and some of them stuck to his boots. He stayed until the fire was out. Then he stood there a while longer, watching nothing. When he went upstairs, he didn't turn on the lights.

The next day he went up. The ladder behind the old building on 18th was rusted through in spots. He tested it with his boot and climbed anyway. His coat caught on a nail near the top and tore. He didn't stop. The roof was gravel and tar, and it gave a little underfoot. There were broken bottles near the vent pipes. Someone had lived up there once or tried to. He crossed to the edge and looked down at the city.

Kansas City sprawled out with its shoulders hunched. The buildings weren't tall like Chicago. They didn't try to be. They just sat there, waiting for something that wasn't coming. Smokestacks. Church steeples. The broad loop of the freeway crawling with trucks. He could see the river, flat and brown and slow, slipping west like it wanted to leave.

He sat near the ledge and took out the sketchpad. The wind flipped the pages. He caught them with one hand and started to draw the skyline. The lines didn't fight him. They came easy. A good trick. A lie. He drew until his fingers were stiff. The wind made his eyes water. He drank from a small flask he'd filled with bourbon and held it in his lap when he wasn't using it.

"Good place to be ugly," a voice said.

He turned. There was a man on the other side of the roof, crouched near a vent. He wore a coat too big for him and a stocking cap pulled low. His beard was gray. His eyes were not.

"Didn't hear you come up," the artist said.

"Didn't make much noise," the man said.

They sat in silence.

The man pulled a cigarette from his coat and lit it with a match cupped in both hands.

"You live up here?" the artist asked.

"Sometimes."

The artist held out the flask. The man took a pull and handed it back.

"They call me Earl," he said.

The artist nodded. "You draw?"

"No," Earl said. "I watch."

The artist showed him the sketch of the skyline. Earl looked at it for a moment.

"City looks better without us in it," Earl said.

The wind picked up and rattled a piece of metal somewhere below.

The artist didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

They drank a little more and watched the shadows stretch out toward the rail yard. The smoke from Earl's cigarette curled up and vanished in the wind.

When the sun got low, Earl stood.

“You be careful coming down,” he said. “A lot of folks fall when they think they won’t.”

Then he was gone.

The artist stayed until the city turned blue and the lights blinked on one by one. Then he packed the sketchpad and the pen and the flask.

He climbed down in the dark.

He woke before the sun. The light hadn’t started yet and the windows showed nothing but dark. There was no reason to rise but he rose anyway. Some mornings, the stillness pulled at him like a hook. He needed to move. To see the city before it put on its face. He put on his boots and coat and took the stairs two at a time. The building creaked behind him like it wanted to sleep longer.

Outside, the streets were wet with something that wasn’t quite rain. Just enough to smear the glass and soften the edges of the streetlights. Trash stirred along the curbs. A Styrofoam cup rolled past him, slow and aimless. He walked east, past shuttered storefronts and a boarded-up diner with a neon sign that still buzzed, though the word “Open” no longer meant anything.

By the bus station, he saw her. She was sitting on the curb, wrapped in a coat made for another woman. The hem dragged in the gutter, soaked through. She held a paper sack in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She wasn’t smoking it. Just holding it.

Her face was hollow. The skin had sunk from the cheekbones and her hair was stringy from the mist. But her eyes were clear. The same shade Anna’s had been when she laughed and told him she was ready to go. He didn’t know what made him stop. Maybe it was the way she looked at him and didn’t ask for anything.

“Cold morning,” he said.

“Colder ones ahead,” she said. Her voice was flat, not unkind.

He sat on the curb a few feet away. The concrete was wet. He didn’t care.

They sat like that a while.

He thought about taking out the sketchpad. He didn’t.

“Want coffee?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, just stood up. They walked three blocks to a corner place that opened before dawn for the cops and the drunks and the ghosts. Inside, the heater clicked and wheezed, and the waitress had tired eyes but poured the cups full.

They sat in a booth with torn vinyl. She put both hands around her mug like it was something sacred. She never told him her name. He didn’t ask.

He looked at her hands. At the way her coat cuffs were stained with dirt and her fingers were raw at the knuckles. He remembered Anna’s hands. The way they trembled when she lifted her cup that last morning. The way she held his face and said nothing before they took her away.

He left two tens on the table and nodded once. She nodded back. Neither of them smiled. He walked home with his hands in his pockets. The sketchpad was still under his coat, untouched.

At the loft, he stood at the table for a long time. Then he opened the pad and tried to draw Anna again. The curve of her cheek. The laugh that used to tilt her head. The shadow of the scarf that trailed down her neck. Still wrong. He crumpled the page and dropped it on the floor. Then he sat in the dark and waited for the sun to come.

The coat was in the back of the closet. He hadn't worn it since the hospital. It was heavy wool, black, with a lining that had started to come loose at the cuffs. She used to call it his undertaker coat. Said he looked like a man who'd forgotten how to leave a funeral. He pulled it down and checked the pockets. In the left one, behind a crumpled transfer stub and a peppermint wrapped in paper, he found the envelope.

It was thin. Folded twice. His name on the front in her handwriting. Small. Careful. The kind of writing that looked practiced even when her hands were shaking. He sat at the table. He didn't open it right away. He set it beside the lamp and stared at the grain of the wood for a while. The lamp clicked once when he turned it on, and the letter caught the light.

He opened it.

Don't draw me like I was at the end.

Don't draw the scarf or the chair or the look you tried not to give me.

Draw me laughing.

Draw the day we got caught in the rain and ran into the station and the old man cursed at us for dripping on his newspapers.

Draw that.

If you can't, then wait.

You will.

Love,

A.

He set the letter down and covered it with his hand. Outside, a horn honked once and the sound carried off into the night. He looked at the sketches on the floor. Most were half-finished. Some were too careful, and others too bitter. He picked one up and tore it once, then again. The paper gave easily. He took them all—the drawings of her, the false smiles, the quiet poses—and made a pile. He opened the window and watched the wind catch them as they went. The city swallowed them like they were nothing.

He sat on the bed with the lamp still burning. The room was warm now, or maybe he just didn't notice the cold. He closed his eyes and remembered the station. The rain. The sound of her laugh echoing off the marble columns. The way she looked when she wasn't trying to be remembered. And for the first time in weeks, he slept.

He didn't pack much. The sketchpad. The pens. A coat without the torn pocket. A flask half full. He left before the sun and walked to Union Station with his head down and his collar up. It was too early for tourists. Only the janitors and the early trains. He bought a ticket without looking at the board. The man behind the counter asked where to.

"West," he said.

The man blinked. "Parkville, maybe?"

"That'll do."

The train was old, the kind that rattled when it turned. The car smelled of coffee and metal. The seats were cold. He didn't mind. Out the window, the city thinned fast. Buildings gave way to trees, trees gave way to stone. The river showed itself now and then between the

hills, brown and wide and slow. A different river than in town. It didn't look ashamed of itself out here.

He didn't draw. He watched.

At the Parkville stop, the train hissed and coughed and came to a quiet halt. There was no one waiting. He stepped down, boots scraping on the metal stair, and stood with the satchel in one hand. The platform was small and smelled like wet leaves and woodsmoke.

He walked. Past the shops with painted windows and signs in old script. Past the bookstore with the iron bell over the door. Past the college with its brick towers and empty quad. He followed the hill down toward the river.

A woman raking leaves looked up from her yard. "You looking for a place?"

He stopped. "Maybe."

"There's a bed and breakfast down by the water. Red house, white fence. Tell Miss Ellen you're tired. That's all she needs to hear."

"Thanks."

He found it easy. The fence was peeled in spots, and the house leaned a little on one side, but the light in the windows was warm and the porch had chairs that looked like they'd waited for someone.

He knocked. A woman in her sixties opened the door. She had a braid and soft eyes and wore a sweater that smelled faintly of cinnamon.

"You need a room?" she asked.

"I do."

"Then come in," she said. "There's tea on the stove."

He followed her through a narrow hall where old pictures hung crooked on the walls. She showed him a room upstairs. It had a bed, a lamp, a writing desk, and a view of the river.

He set down the bag and looked out the window. The river moved slow below the bluff, curving away into the trees.

"You look like someone who doesn't know what he's looking for," she said.

He didn't answer.

"That's all right," she said. "This is a good place for that."

She left and shut the door gently. He stood a long time, staring out at the river. Then he sat down at the desk, opened the sketchpad, and stared at the blank page. He didn't draw. Not yet.

The bed was old and firm. It didn't creak when he turned. The sheets smelled of sunlight and lavender. He slept twelve hours and didn't dream. When he woke, the room was full of golden light, and the river was blue for once. It looked clean from a distance. He stayed in bed and watched it move. He didn't reach for the sketchpad. Downstairs, Miss Ellen had left tea in a blue mug. She pointed him to a trail that ran along the bluff. He thanked her and walked it.

The trees were still thick with leaves. Some had turned, and some hadn't, like they couldn't agree it was fall yet. Squirrels darted between roots, and the wind through the branches made the only sound. He walked until his legs ached. Then he sat on a bench with peeling paint and watched the water for a long time.

He thought of Anna. Not her last days. Not the hospital. He thought of her sitting on the windowsill in her bare feet, cracking sunflower seeds with her teeth, spitting the shells

into a coffee mug. He remembered the way she narrowed her eyes when she looked at the light. Not because it hurt her—but because she wanted to see what it was hiding.

He went back to the room and sat by the window. The floor creaked under his chair. The desk was smooth from years of hands. He set the sketchpad down but didn't open it. He sat in the quiet and let the light fall across the page.

Outside, the wind picked up and sent leaves spinning past the window. One landed on the sill, clung to the wood, then fluttered away. The pen was still in his pocket. He took it out. The nib was worn, but it would hold. He drew a line. Just one. A shape that could have been a hill, or the curve of a shoulder, or the bend in the river.

It didn't matter yet. He closed the sketchpad and watched the last of the light crawl up the wall.

Downstairs, the kettle whistled. He didn't move. There are moments when a man stops waiting for the right time. When he doesn't force it, and he doesn't run from it. He just lets it come. This was one of those moments.

He waited until night. The light was wrong during the day. It was too soft. It was forgiving. He didn't want forgiving. He wanted the kind that showed the bones of things. The room was still. The bed was made. The tea mug sat empty on the desk. He turned on the lamp. It was a small lamp with a yellow shade, and it lit the desk in a tight circle. Everything outside the circle disappeared.

He opened the sketchpad. He took out the pen. He didn't think about what to draw. That had ruined everything before. He let the hand move. One line, then another. He followed the slope of a hill and it became a shoulder. He followed the shape of the river and it became hair. The laugh—not her mouth, but the way her chin tilted when it happened. The girl on the sidewalk. The boy's mouth open in sleep. The woman's back bent under the weight of them both. He drew Earl, crouched like a crow on the rooftop, cigarette burning like a star. He drew the gutter and the cracked coffee mug. He drew a coat with one torn pocket. He drew Kansas City, not as it was, but as it felt. Empty but breathing. Old but not dead.

The lines didn't lie. They weren't perfect. They shook in places. But they were true. When he finished, the sketchpad was still open, and the river was black outside the window. He sat back and rubbed his eyes. The lamplight turned the ink golden at the edges. He hadn't known what he was making. But now that it was done, he understood. It wasn't Anna. It wasn't the city. It was the weight of love carried through a world that forgets too quickly. And it was enough. He didn't sign it. He didn't need to.

He left the next morning. No one said much. Miss Ellen handed him a brown bag with two biscuits, a boiled egg, and an apple. He thanked her. She smiled and nodded once.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But I found something."

She seemed to understand. The sky was low and gray, and the trees held still like they were listening. The train was late. He sat on the bench and watched the river slip past, slow and brown again, but not ugly. Just honest. He didn't open the sketchpad. When the train came, he climbed aboard without looking back. The city showed itself in pieces. Bridges. Smokestacks. Then rooftops. Then the glass teeth of downtown. It didn't welcome him and it didn't resist him. It just was.

He walked from the station with the satchel slung over his shoulder. The streets were loud again. The wind off the river was colder than before. The same man was still selling newspapers outside the drugstore. The same church bell rang at the same hour. Nothing had changed, but something had. He stopped at Union Station again, on his way home.

Inside, near the long marble benches and the echo of footsteps, he sat and took out the sketchpad. He opened to the page. The lines were there, just as they had been. Unchanged. Still breathing. He set it down on the bench beside him and stood.

No note. No signature.

Someone would find it. Someone would see it. Maybe they'd understand. Maybe they wouldn't. That didn't matter anymore. He walked to the exit and didn't look back.

Outside, the wind moved in long, even gusts through the traffic and the trees. He buttoned his coat, put his hands in his pockets, and kept walking. He went to the café on Jefferson where Anna used to read. It was still there. Same chipped tables. Same string of lights that never worked right. Same smell—coffee, books, and something old in the walls. He used to wait in the back while she stood near the counter and read poems to people who didn't always listen. She'd laugh afterward and say that was the trick—to say something true even if nobody heard it.

He ordered black coffee and sat by the window. The sketchpad was gone. He didn't need it. The pen was still in his pocket. That was enough. Outside, the light came through the glass and spilled across the table. It cut hard shadows across the sugar jar and the silver napkin holder. It made the scratches in the tabletop stand out like veins.

He didn't try to draw it. Some things were not for paper. He held the coffee in both hands and watched the light shift. It moved without meaning to. It touched everything and stayed nowhere. Anna used to call it the honest thief.

The waitress brought a refill. He nodded. She smiled and left him alone. The café filled slowly. Students, workers, people with books or just time to waste. Nobody looked at him. That was good. He liked being nobody.

He sipped the coffee. It was hot and bitter. The way it should be. There was no masterpiece now. No weight to carry. Just the sound of chairs scraping and spoons clinking and the city outside breathing in slow, steady rhythms.

The light moved again, a little higher on the wall. He didn't follow it this time. He just let it go.

END.