

## A Rabid Artist's Goodbye Letter

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A favorite art professor of mine once told me there are, in the broadest sense, only three kinds of artists: the clever, the happy, and the brilliant. As a rule, the brilliant and the clever are never happy. Only those artists who find the median between sales and talent lead a comfortable existence. I hadn't believed my professor about this for the longest time, even though the evidence roared in my stomach most nights since I left art school. I passed the chance of "selling out," of publicly advertising my work, all in favor of privacy, and I have been starving ever since.

I was bitten by a rat yesterday morning as I emptied out my stale cereal. That hefty rat has been living in the walls of this crumbling home since I moved here. His squeaks blend with the creaking of the wood. I could swear he talks whenever I'm intoxicated enough to believe my imagination. One time, that rat was singing "Strawberry Fields Forever," and I've found it hard to lay down rat poison ever since, partly because I imagine the vermin's personality as being British and therefore human, but mostly because I cannot afford toilet paper, let alone rat killer.

Finally Rat McCartney has bitten me, and today I'm feeling feverish, with cold-like symptoms. Remembering what I've learned of diseases from school, there's a good chance I have rabies.

Oh well, I say. What's the harm if I'm rabid? I've already gained some notoriety, and not for my art. I'm missing an ear thanks to my madness and pathetic longings. I may as well die in an equally pathetic way. About a year ago, my former college friend Azeala Crowton summoned me from my house to show me a portrait she had begun of me. Now that

I am notorious, I seem to have become part of her artwork. An image of my face, in shades of purple, blue and black, from a photograph she had shot of me in our college years. My mouth hung agape subtly, my wide black eyes on the verge of disaster. My face was framed by my short, mad, mop of black hair, much as it is now, and my expression could only be described as frightened.

“Do you like it? I wanted your approval.” Her pretention and cruelty won me over at last.

“Azeala, what font are you going to use when you print ‘FAILURE’ as the caption?”

“Why do you think you’re a failure?” Her robotic tone did not flux, “If I wanted to put a caption at the bottom I’d make it say ‘DIRT POOR.’”

“Why don’t you write a sentence. ‘*She ate a roach this morning in her dry cereal by mistake*’ . . .”

I haven’t been satisfied with a thing I’ve painted in what feels like years. Perhaps now, I should find a gutter to lie in so that when the public finds me dead with foam at my mouth, I will have become the artist they always wanted.

I’m starting this letter because if I’m dying of rabies, my God! I want to know how it came to this? Here on paper, maybe I can retrace my steps to this point. Perhaps I can even find meaning in it all . . .

A year out of art school, my childhood friend Azeala Crowton and I were both artists on separate career paths. We both agreed, in a friendly way, that we should be in other fields of work. I told her honestly that she was more of a saleswoman, and advertising genius, than she was a creative artist, and she told me that I needn’t create beautiful things since I was beautiful. Regardless of our differences, we had always been casual sidekicks, our friendship being one of unspoken time-cemented trust.

As always, we were nursing one another’s sickly egos on that day in Spring of 1996. I was praising her wit as she was suggesting I be a model.

"I'm not tall enough," I told her. "Besides, my looks fall a little short of model, don't you think?"

"Not really," her dark blue eyes were hazy when she told me this. Together, for fun, she and I were decorating her new house-studio. The notable lack of mirrors did not surprise me. While she did not shun the eye, Azeala was no beauty. Since childhood, she had been mocked for her smaller left eye, a long face, and her poor, pallid complexion. Usually, in public, she wore masks of makeup to cover her ashen skin, but there was no getting around her lanky, freakish height. "Plenty of people are attracted to you," she was telling me. "You're beautiful."

I caught my reflection in a fish tank, "I'm alright," and then forgot my own image quickly. Living in the tank were what looked like fat coral reefs for a moment. Only suddenly I saw that they were the largest phallic objects I had ever beheld.

"What the hell is that?"

"Oh those are geoducks." Azeala told me, "They look like c—k."

"They're giant p—s!" I exclaimed. "Where did you find them?"

"They're all over the world. They just live underground for like 140 years or so, so most people don't know about 'em. I think they're hot . . ."

And so the most famous feature of Azeala's studio-house had been installed.

Several months down the road, her studio, infamously nicknamed

"The C—kpit" became a household name. Word had traveled, along with photographs, of Ms. Crowton's pop art. She had constructed a large tank complete with a cave that gaped open, as the geoducks were placed facing the gape. Words like "scandalous," "controversial," and "edgy" became synonymous with Azeala's work.

Meanwhile, after six months of working as a book illustrator for a publishing company, I was fired. They told me there were too many lines in my artwork, and I realized it was useless to fight for the job.

So I became a salesclerk at a simple arts store, and meanwhile con-

tinued my painting and applications to museums, companies, and anyone who would listen. Selling the artwork of other artists did not bother me. However, I would soon discover that I was no saleswoman.

One year later, I went to Azeala's art film premier of *Boy by the Pond*. She offered a lazed smile as I approached her, and her new muse, the Brazilian male model Filipo Hernez.

"Fil, this is my best friend from school Claudia Pooghkeepsie. Isn't she gorgeous?"

He was cordial and extremely charming but had a thick accent that suggested English was his *second* second language. When his eyes were not where photographers called him to look, his comely face was forever on Azeala.

The short black-and-white film was mind-numbingly devoid of meaning and featured Filipo sitting near a pond where he stared at a tortoise wearing a crown of flowers on its head. It was a mere fifteen minutes, but actually lulled an old man next to me asleep, despite the fact that naked people were copulating in the background of the scene. The film was applauded by all at the end, and for lack of a better reaction, I did the same.

I inched through the crowd toward Azeala and her muse, but my attention was quickly stolen by a familiar visage in the distance. My favorite college professor Holdan Marx was present, conversing with someone. As always, I was drawn to his handsome face and his eloquence.

I called to him, though I stood near enough to simply speak. He smiled, sincerely in awe. "Claudia, where have you been! You still haven't brushed your hair!"

I hid my shyness well behind the guise of humor. "Well, I *am* an artist. I have more pretentious things to do."

I had much to tell him, and knew the butterflies in my stomach would not settle until I updated him on how I'd lost my job as an illustrator because I hadn't drawn a block of cheese for the cover of a book titled *The*

*Biggest Cheese.* I quickly suggested he and I have dinner together, so that I could bombard him with stories and hear his insights. But there was a hesitation in his sharp blue eyes. He was cautious, testing the air. He checked his watch as I recalled the time he asked me on a date following my completion of his class. It was against policy to date students in one's own class, so he had waited. But even then, it had never been more than dating and kissing. The age difference, he had said, felt wrong to him.

But tonight he nodded. "That sounds like a good idea, actually. After this, we'll go somewhere. Where would you like to eat?"

"I was thinking Taco Bell," I told him, hoping that a thirteen-year difference was no longer a barrier for us.

To my relief, he laughed and agreed to a casual meal. After lingering a few more minutes at Azeala's premier, we left the pop artist and her model to the paparazzi. For the next few years, Azeala would be surrounding herself with rich and beautiful people, so there was little need for me to befriend her it seemed. She busied herself with celebrities, and I was preoccupied with Holdan.

People are exceedingly strange, more so when you take the time to know them. Strangers are mundane and predictable when compared to the oddness that is acquaintanceship.

Take Mr. Ronald Murfin for instance; a cultivated and soft-spoken man resembling Mr. Monopoly, who often seems as trusting as a child. Six months after Holdan and I had reconnected, Mr. Murfin swept into my life one random day.

The little man strolled into the art shop where I worked, just as Holdan was leaving me with a box of take-out he had bought me for lunch. Murfin's soft voice interrupted our brief kiss goodbye. He asked how large the store sold paintings. Meanwhile, Holdan lingered a moment longer before he warily left me to my work. He had reason to worry, for I had nearly lost my job the week before, after talking the same Mr. Murfin *out* of buying an imitation African tribal statue. I persuaded

him, somehow, to buy one elsewhere because the cheap imitation felt like a rip-off for someone so rich. The fact that he had returned to this shop, to ask my advice again, was nothing short of weird.

He shook my hand gracefully, and explained that he had a rather large living room. "It's about half the size of your average football field."

I had known he was well-to-do, but I had no idea that he was filthy rich. We had nothing that large in the front gallery, so I led him into the back where originals were stored.

In the dimly lit back room, where the rare pieces sat on altars, I walked him through cautiously.

"My walls are mauve," he explained. "I don't want it to clash, you see." I had found and pointed out a massive portrait of a haggard Native American with judgmental eyes. For a whole minute, Murfin twirled his mustache in contemplation.

"I'm not so sure. I would prefer you to see my living room and the colors in it, and then you tell me which of these you think would go."

I attempted to reason with the little rich man, stating that I was not a qualified interior designer and that it was not in my line of duty to see customers' houses. At length, he jovially called on my supervisor for permission to take me to his house. Apparently, his jolliness was enough to convince my boss, a boozy old lady, that I should definitely see the millionaire's house. Or perhaps this was punishment for losing her business over the past few months.

Murfin's mansion was pompous enough to make any working class citizen vomit. Massive bathtubs of marble, a chandelier of jewels, and a disturbing painting whose subject featured a clown and a rat are only a few features. Then there was the huge, empty room, which begged for a portrait above its elephantine fireplace large enough to cook meat over.

I stared at the wall for some time, visualizing various portraits that would fit in its place. None of them, I had to admit, would fit on the wall, mostly because few of them were worth their sales price. When I

told Murfin this, his brow crinkled in a hurt fashion. “You suppose I should have one custom-made?”

“Yes . . . I have a friend who I think you would like,” I told him, trying not to roll my eyes. “Azeala Crowton.”

Murfin put his hand to his heart, as though I insulted his mother. He was of the view that her films were “utterly pornographic” and that I had sadly misjudged his tastes. I held my tongue on that topic, and instead started naming some local artists.

“Would you, perhaps?” He offered heartily.

“Uh, well, I am an artist, but I’m not widely known. I really haven’t sold much and –”

“I’ll tell you what I see there,” he squared his fingers at the unadorned wall, imaginatively, with sweeping motions. “I see a huge painting of a beautiful biscuit!”

“A . . . biscuit?”

“Yes, a biscuit!”

“The British biscuit or a buttermilk biscuit?”

“Buttermilk,” he chuckled and patted my shoulder in a fatherly way. “You paint it, and I will buy it at your price.”

Gaping, I was much too baffled to decline the offer.

That very night I began a huge outline of what I had imagined to be mundane, and what I somehow turned into a wonder by peeking into my inner child’s eyes, where even a biscuit was a subject of great speculation. By the week’s end my biscuit painting, which I titled “Mundane” sold to Mr. Murfin at my boss’s set price, and I got half the profit. Suddenly, my last name carried a little more weight and I began to see that I would never be a good saleswoman, but I was not an awful artist.

By late 1998, I never would have seen myself where I am now, living in a condemned estate with rabid animals. There were days of true bliss that year.

In return for my biscuit painting, Mr. Murfin had spread word of

my work and soon thereafter I was being paid to produce actual art. While Azeala Crowton made a fortune producing mundane collages of celebrity faces in Technicolor, I had somehow procured a modest but precious respect from other artists who happened to know Mr. Murfin and his consorts. All of them seemed to enjoy the same aspect of my artwork, namely its “ethereal quality,” as they termed it. Azeala continued to rub shoulders with America’s favorite people, as I worked in the little art shop and as a freelance artist. I had not spoken with Azeala for quite some time, when one day I caught an MTV interview of her, in which she dryly called me “an artist’s artist.” For the first time in my life, I did not analyze what she meant. I knew I had found my happy median.

In August of ’98, I had the opportunity to display art at a Modernist museum in Mississippi. The opportunity was a grand one, but this process was not as easy as submitting a painting. I would need to prepare a speech explaining the piece for an audience of viewers. I themed my speech on viewers’ independent interpretation.

“How would you describe my work?” I asked Holdan when I set to penning the speech.

“I’m not sure. Why don’t you tell them about yourself,” he suggested.

When it came time for the fateful speech, I nearly tripped on the stage before the audience, and for a moment I thought I was choking on my three-hours-digested lunch. I cleared my throat over the microphone. I never got to the first word of my speech. A pair of hazy blue eyes in the crowd wrenched my vocal chords and slew the presentation dead. The painting itself was of a bird perched on a rusting sword, an easy enough subject to analyze. But Azeala was in the crowd.

When I vomited on the red-wood stage and caught my breath, I begged my body to faint.

Somewhere in the audience a pair of hands clapped and the burst of applause startled me. This room of viewers thought my retching was a part of the presentation.



Indignation has a way of taking everything, even moments of accidental triumphs. The only thought I could process during the applause was that nobody present cared about meaning, they wanted a performing artist; a circus monkey of sorts. Before I could stop myself, I fled the room.

The museum's manager made a grab for my arm, offering solace and attempting to hold me still. "It's okay, dear," she was saying. "They thought it was part of the show."

"Well, maybe the next artist will shove something up their a—hole! They'll love that!"

I regretted backing out of that deal, I regretted snapping at the manager, and I regretted letting misunderstanding devour my hope.

The day I vomited on the museum stage marked the start of my true downward spiral. My nerves began to get the best of me by the end of '98, and though the art world did not disown me, I seemed to have disowned it in my heart. When I heard news that Azeala Crowton had sold a giant replication of a Mr. Goodbar wrapper for five thousand dollars, a certain emptiness overwhelmed and it stained every aspect of my life.

Holdan caught me one day throwing away five canvas paintings as he stepped into my apartment. "Why were you throwing those away?"

"Because they're crap. They're all crap. I'm crap. I have to crap." I left the conversation to go to the restroom, and poor Holdan was at a loss of words.

My condition worried him, and out of guilt I eventually began to see a shrink. The therapist swiftly classified me as nervous paranoid personality and later as a borderline personality, both revelations that were not surprising when one considers my family's history of such disorders. I was medicated, and the symptoms supposedly faded. Even on the nerve pills, I still lost my job for a lack of enthusiasm. On the day of this dismissal, Holdan arrived at my apartment with hopes of comforting me. He offered to let me move into his house until I found a new place, since

I would need to find a less costly apartment. But I declined, on the grounds that I couldn't have him take care of me.

"I wouldn't be caring for you, Claudia." He watched me fiddle with my few decorative belongings. "It would be a place for you to stay until you've got a new one."

"I'll have a new apartment soon. And besides, my grandmother left me a nice, big house."

"What? Then why haven't you been living there all along?" he demanded.

"It's . . . condemned. But nobody's knocking it down. There's no reason to."

"You're going to live in a house with no electricity and no running water?" His eyes were tinged with horror. "Where is this place?"

"It's rural. And we don't *know* that the water doesn't work."

"Claudia, you're being unreasonable," Holdan asserted correctly.

I was afloat elsewhere, unable to act rationally. "I'm being practical. Besides, I can't let you take care of me."

He took my face into his hands, offering a final time, "Listen, I'm trying to help you get by. I know you can do it yourself. Just let me help you, please."

It was a tempting scenario, to live with Holdan for a month or so, warm and secure, blissful as ever. And yet not for a moment did I consider taking his offer, because at the moment I was an onlooker into my own life.

"No, Holdan. I'm sorry."

His reassuring touch left me and his eyes fell to the floor. "I can't watch you destroy yourself anymore, Claudia. I don't know why you can't let yourself be happy."

He went to leave me, and I did not attempt to stop him. I stood with my heart aching, but numb to it, since I had felt the pangs far in advance.

Over a tacky cell phone, I would tell everyone (my mother and Holdan) that I was staying with a friend, but they still probed with precision to find out what made me sound so somber. They sensed my disarray but I could not share it with them.

I had found a job at a local crafts shop, simply stocking and cleaning the small store. The pay was meager and the work tedious, but in the evenings I could go to my grandmother's house. In the old mansion, down an obscure dusty, stretch of abandoned road, I could create whatever I wanted on canvas, and know I was alone. But even then, I hated my artwork for reasons I couldn't understand. My old cell phone worked most of the time, as I charged it at my work place in the city, and what money I had could pay for its scratchy service. But I scarcely called anyone on it.

As for the house itself, it is more the skeleton of what once stood as a beautiful southern mansion. Today it rots and smells of mold, but is sturdy enough to shield from the rain. Several months of existing in its hollowness, and I grew used to its creaking beauty. I was saving money but I lost sight of what it was for at times. Already I knew there was a rat large enough to rival some cats, sharing the house with me, and I did nothing to kill it. Perhaps I knew even then that Rat McCartney would seal my doom some day.

Nobody knew where the abandoned house was, not even Holdan, though he begged for the address over the phone, day after day.

"I'm working on finding an apartment," I chided him over the cell phone. "What? Do you think I can't do it? Are you going to get me arrested!"

"No, Claudia. It's not safe where you're staying!"

The wind had the house singing in the silence Holdan and I allowed between us on that phone call, a conversation that would repeat almost everyday.

For months, life lay paralyzed in this routine. The tedious job, the

delirious process of my stagnant thoughts, and the loneliness I accepted. Both the waking world and my dreams became indistinguishable blurry montages of monotony which my nerve pills only thickened.

Then came a day when I dreamt I was chopping onions in the haggard kitchen, as Azeala sauntered in, followed by a large black cat, one I was sure had died with my grandmother. Dream-Azeala was saying things to me about how artwork sells. *“The joke is on the buyer. As soon as you believe that, the better life will get. People won’t buy if they’re not shocked!”*

*“There are other emotions besides shock,”* I argued, the onion-induced tears falling. *“I want to bring forth other emotions. All I want to do is paint things that make people happy, or contemplative, or sad. Why can’t I do that?”*

*“You can. You just won’t make a living off of it.”*

*“F—k you, Azeala!”* I turned on her with my knife, snarling. *“F—k you! You are to artists what Count Chocula is to vampires!”*

*“Well,”* she remained contemplative, barely flinching where she sat. *“I see I was wrong. Sometimes the joke’s on the artist.”*

The obese black cat meowed with Azeala’s final derision and I had reached the end of my wick. I was slashing fiercely at her face, at the hazy eyes which avoided mine so endlessly. As I crashed to the floor, the very tangible chair beneath me snapped and a searing pain consumed my head. I did not yet realize, however, that the knife and my bleeding ear were no dream. I was still yelling at the Azeala which had been a spawn of my drugged imagination. I managed to call for help, and surrender the house’s address to Holdan.

The next week, my therapists took away my prescription of nerve pills, quite abruptly and commanded that I move in with Holdan or a family member. On the same day doctors scheduled me for a surgery to remove my infected ear. It was Holdan who paid the medical bills, and as I lay awake in the warm hospital bed, a bandage around my head, I

thanked him. "I would tell you to keep the ear, but that's already been done I think."

He smiled in acknowledgment of my sad joke, and took my hand. He seemed to have aged, albeit gracefully, and I could feel in his touch that he was attempting to distance himself. He begged that this event would be my wake-up call. But soon, due to the abrupt withdrawal from my pills, another obstacle would prevent my "waking."

On the first day of the year 2000, as others rang in the "new millennium," I was drinking by myself in my grandmother's house. Why couldn't I part with the place, I don't know. Past the stage of medicinal withdrawal, I was then drinking only because I was stupid, ironically the same reason I was alone and still in the mansion.

When I found Azeala standing at the rickety front door, I closed it promptly only to have her knock again. I hissed, "What do you want?"

"To give you some, uh, food. And also a proposal from some millionaire who likes your work."

I let her inside out of sheer curiosity, because a nightmare would not include a gift basket of food, uncharacteristically thoughtful as it was. Numbly, I let her sit at the recently dusted, almost decent, table. She was cringing. "This place is grittier than I thought it would be. You've got a good grunge thing going on."

I asked how she had found me, and she revealed that Holdan had sent her with the basket of food she had set on the table. "He said you'd be starving. You know, he's trying to put you in an institute. I don't know why he wants to do that. You seem to be doing fine." She was watching a fat roach scurry across the floor. I crushed it briskly with my bare foot.

For a second Azeala's pale face froze in absolute disgust, and she seemed to anticipate something.

"What? What is it?"

"Nothing," she eyed the murdered roach. "I was just going to see if you were gonna eat it or not."

A strange and rare thing happened then, as Azeala sincerely smiled in laughter. Quickly, I joined in the humor of the situation and found myself laughing as well. We cackled for a few minutes before Azeala finally handed over the art proposal she had brought to me, and I the side-splitting pain of my laughter began to subside into heartache. Her bleached blonde hair was thinning, I noted, prematurely for a woman her age, and her eyes had bags beneath them.

I read the well-to-do art aficionado's letter. He was offering a handsome fee for one large portrait of the nearby city. He apparently was a local, and quite impressed with my style of painting and "heart." He was a friend of my original patron Mr. Murfin.

"So what do you think? It could be your door back into the art world." Azeala sniffed an emptied bottle of beer, cringing. "From what I've heard you're on hiatus."

I eyed the same mundane bottle she was examining, sensation and feeling dawning on me again. I accepted the proposal, and Azeala offered to serve as the delivery woman for both the buyer and myself. She planned to return Sunday.

"Is there a catch?" I asked her.

For the first time in years, her eyes met with mine directly, "A catch? Like what?" and then she murmured to herself, in the most sincere tone I'd ever heard from her, "I can't steal your talent or anything."

But before she left, my hand found the barren spot where my ear belonged. "Wait! Azeala! This is because word has got around about my ear, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, you could use some controversy."

That week stretched out into a restless effort of churning the perfect image. If the world of Dr. Seuss were to visit this city, it would look as my painting did. Literally, I sweat over it for hours of turmoil. I avoided alcohol. Yet, in the end, I went back to the melted ice chest I kept near the kitchen, and seized the last beer. I had everything but the hues of the

setting sun, and I could not sleep until I added them. My cup of water sat empty on the floor. When I finally got the faucet to vomit several drops of liquid, I found my necessary tubes of paint empty. Drunk, delirious, stupid, and desperate, I used blood to mix with my last bits of sunset, and completed the canvas that night. Only when I had completed the fantasy version of the city, did Azeala's advice about controversy ring in my ear. I had used my actual blood in a painting . . . When Azeala arrived to collect the canvas, I almost told her about my small bodily sacrifice, but decided against it.

Azeala, however, seemed unable to leave without giving another word of advice. "That check he wrote for you should be enough to rent an apartment for one month."

"I already have enough for another apartment, I just . . ." I could not complete my own thought.

Today I caught the rat. Well, actually my grandmother's haunted estate seemed to put him out of his rabid misery. In possibly the world's oldest rabbit snare, the huge vermin struggled for breath. I was returning from a leisurely walk down the dusty road when I heard that familiar squeaking and found the giant rat caught behind the house in the garden of weeds. At least he was surrounded by the prettiest of weeds, the ones that actually grow purple flowers at their tips. My favorite color. Blood and foam caked around the rat's mouth but I did not want a second bite from him. I dug McCartney a grave right there by the flower-weeds. A rusty shovel was the one thing still in the old mansion, it turns out.

I took a bath in the crusty tub upstairs, and read over this letter of mine. I am twenty-eight this year. And now I get it. Azeala isn't happy. She never was. All anyone has to do is look at her to know that. Who is happy? The artists who practice artistry without sacrificing themselves. There is a happy middle. Never had I been happier than when I was selling a painting here and there, holding a stable job, and laughing with Holdan.

After rereading this, I called Holdan. He is on his way to pick me up, probably planning to check me into an institute somewhere. Maybe I can be vaccinated for rabies if it isn't too late.

The world is in a whirl, and one of two deaths is drawing near. One of these deaths is not actual mortality. One of these deaths is to confess, or to present, or to simply exist before someone, or to sacrifice, or to share, all of which frighten the hell out of me, perhaps more than actual death. Until today, as I lay in a pool of my own sweat, possibly rabid, I feared presentation more than death. Today, a death where I run down the street foaming at the mouth, is more frightening than giving my work and my soul for their sum, however they may be misunderstood. Holdan is on his way . . . and I won't die, because McCartney wasn't rabid, he was just going blind. He had cataracts in his eyes, and he ran into a rabbit snare. I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die because the most frightening of thoughts is the idea of my soul trapped in Azeala Crowton's pop art portrait of me, with a caption that read "*Neither clever nor brilliant, and far from happy.*"