

# RED

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I forgot to buy my medicine. The little orange pill bottle lay open on my bathroom counter; empty, like a gaping mouth waiting to be filled and I forgot to feed him. I feel the calming hollowness begin to fade from my skull as the buzzards press against the gates of my mind, unrelenting. I need my medicine before they seep into my consciousness. I turn and leave my bathroom, heading towards the front door.

Red paint drenched the floor. Squelching against my toes. So. Much. Red. I almost forgot that, too. I need to clean. I grab a washcloth, but there is too much. I need something better. It is all over, spilling into the kitchen, slowly seeping into the clean beige carpet. Is it on the walls, too? I always liked the word beige. Beige, blaze, craze. Nothing really rhymes with beige. That's why I like it. It's unique. Beeeiiiiigeee. Okay, stop that.

Painting is my true passion. I love all the vivid colors swirling and morphing into one grand being. I love abstract the best, although, I do love a good scenery picture: a snapshot of the world, pristine and perfect in that moment of captured beauty. A couple of galleries and Farmer's Markets around the city will display my work but, for the most part, I paint for the release it gives me. This particular painting was a disaster, though. The red was where the blue should be and the green was completely obscured. I give up cleaning for the moment. I need better supplies.

Something moves behind me. I turn around and yelp. Someone is in my house! I run from the movement and hide behind the first thing I could find: the banister. I listen for any hint of movement and, upon hearing nothing I glance out.

A lady stares at me. She is a nice looking lady; frail and skinny with short blonde hair sticking out from every angle. She looks about as frightened as I do, with big, blue eyes staring me down. I have the strangest feeling to reach out to her; she seems scared. I start to stand and she does, too. A feeling of recognition washes over me. It is just a reflection. She is me, staring out from that horrible silvery window my husband placed decoratively next to the entryway. He loves mirrors.

“It’s like a forever-changing painting. One that represents our life together and the truths our minds make us forget. That, and it makes this place seem bigger or some practical shit like that,” he said the first time he placed it on the wall, smiling at his own wit. His smile made the whole room glow bright yellow with a soft orangey tinge that made me tingle, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I didn’t get it, so I kissed him instead, and there it stayed. Stupid mirror. I stare at the frazzled lady again, assessing her with more dignity this time. I need a brush.

I brush my hair and place a blanket over the mirror, so she won’t scare me again when I came back. Shaking my head, I walk out the front door. The cement was cold beneath my feet. Oh, right. I need shoes.

I walk out again, this time with my favorite running shoes on, tied tightly. I feel like I can outrun anything with them on. They make me feel safe from all the watchers and buzzards that lurk in my mind.

I can feel the redness emanate through my door. Like a giant scarlet X scribbled there for all to see, begging someone to find it.

“Well, hello there!” I spin around to see my next-door neighbor grooming her potted plants. She is a nice enough lady, a little nosy, but she always comes to see my new paintings whenever I display them, and my husband occasionally invites her for dinner. Her gray hair is coming loose from her bun as she tends to her flowers, and she smiles a crinkled smile up at me, reminding me of freshly kneaded dough.

“Everything okay darling? You seem a bit more frazzled than usual today, what happened to your hand?”

I look down and see some of the red paint clinging to my skin, I furiously rub it along my pants and reply: “It’s not blood.”

She cocks her head a bit at that and chuckles. “Well that’s good to hear. New artwork? I heard a ruckus this morning and saw your husband leave in bit of a tizzy. He asked me to check on you later and I have to admit, I forgot until you walked outside. He must’ve felt guilty about something to ask. Did you two have a bit of a tussle this morning?”

We did. We fight a lot, but this time was different. I can’t quite remember what happened; it was early in the morning and I was still half-asleep. I remember him yelling about something and telling me he was leaving. I think it was probably my fault. It usually is, but usually he’s patient with me. Not this morning. He looks like a Cheez-It box

when he's angry, all red in the face with his bright orange construction vest sticking out. He's kind of boxy, too. But I don't tell him that because I love him – even if he is boxy. I think I told him that when he was yelling at me. Maybe that's why he disappeared. He hates that I call him a Cheez-It box, he never understands why I say it, but they're my favorite snack and he's my favorite person, so it only makes sense.

I hate it when he gets mad. I can't think and I lash out to make the angry, dark rust-colored waves stop. Red glazes over my vision and I remember the paint. That's why I need my medicine: to keep from lashing out and to help my focus.

"I think so," I replied to her question. "But I need to go. I need supplies."

"You think so? Can't you remember? Wait, where are you headed? What kind of supplies? Cassie? Do you need any help?" Her questions made me nervous. My hand starts to twitch, a nervous habit.

"No, thank you." I tell her, ignoring the rest of her questions. I begin walking down the steps. She hollers a couple more questions in my direction, but stops and sighs, knowing that I was done answering. I feel bad for a moment, but I have to hurry before the spies catch on, and talking to Kathy is wasting valuable time – she can talk for hours if allowed.

The pharmacy isn't very far from my house, so I decide not to take the bus. I like the fresh air; it helps me to focus sometimes, too. Whenever I get frazzled, Chris and I go for a walk around our building, sometimes farther if I can take it, but sometimes I can't. During those times we build a fort out of blankets and couch cushions. We eat pizza and cookies and all the bad stuff that makes me feel warm and gooey inside. But Chris wasn't here. The crosswalk blinks its red hand at me and I quickly cross the street.

The sky is a gray canvas, haphazardly broken by bright blue streaks of sky and dotted with the occasional black smudge of birds or planes. Overcast days are my favorite. They're not too hot, which means there aren't as many people walking around, but it's not raining either, so I don't have to worry about bringing an umbrella or a raincoat. Not that the rain really bothers me; I just prefer being able to see where I'm going.

I try to remember our argument. I remember him being angry, but at what I don't recall. Why exactly... What day is it? Saturday? No, no. Chris doesn't work on Saturdays. Although, then, where is he? Red.

It must be Sunday. That means I'm two days late taking my medicine. That's not good. I pick up the pace.

Sometimes, counting my steps helps me to focus on reality. That's what my therapist says, anyways. Counting brings us to the present. So I start counting. One. Two, three. Four. Five, six. My feet create a steady tempo in line with my internal metronome-like counting. Sixteen. Seventeen, eighteen. My feet stumble over a dip in the sidewalk and I look up to catch my balance.

Faces stare at me. They seem detached from their bodies. I see only their faces, judging me with their twisted expressions. "They aren't watchers, they are people. Nice, normal people," I say to myself. Or wait, did I say that aloud? A lady walking by me gives me a weird side-glance and crosses to the other side of the sidewalk. Yeah... I probably said that out loud. I do that sometimes, well, more than sometimes. My thoughts are just so loud that they become words and gestures without me even realizing. I return to my counting, in my head this time, but I can still feel their stares on me.

A little splotch of black scurries along the concrete path: a spider. I've always had trouble with spiders. They were the first delusions I saw back when the symptoms began.

I can't let it transmit any data, real or not. YA HA! I jumped on it, squishing its camera and guts into the concrete. Well, that may have been a little too conspicuous. I glance around; people are definitely staring now.

I pretend I don't see them and observe the city around me. The buildings are all squished together with shoebox backyards: uniform in size and color. They are all reds, browns, greens, and whites. Earthy buildings, harmonically arranged to seem natural, which makes them stick out all the more. My house is green, like the colors leaves are just before they make their autumn change. It is a simple color for a simple neighborhood. I like the simplicity, though; it makes it easier to manage my otherwise chaotic life.

A crow flies by in my peripheral vision and I turn to watch it fly away over a large, brick building until it disappears into the distance. A billboard is plastered alongside the building: "Stop and smell the bacon—Wendy's." I stop and sniff, but I don't smell anything aside from the usual city smells. I am hungry, though. I feel my insides gurgling in silent yearning. I think there's a Wendy's next to the pharmacy. I really need my medication.

Maybe I should buy a hamburger for when Chris returns, he's always hungry. The biggest burger with condiments on the side and only one pickle slice, no more. "Too much pickle overwhelms the palate," he always says. I always have two pickle slices anyways. Red. I really need some cleaning supplies, too.

One thousand nine hundred and thirty steps later, I arrive at the store. I walk into the pharmacy; a small line awaits me, which is perfect because I need time to rehearse my lines. Doctors of any kind made me nervous, the way they stare into your soul and extract the information they need. If I wasn't careful they would take too much, and only a puddle of brains and nerves would remain.

I mumble the lines to myself over and over as I wait. Hi my name is Cassandra Black. Yes, like the color. I need to refill my prescription. My birthday is May 21st 1985. Thank you. The line moves quickly, and as the last customer walks off, a middle-aged monster confronts me.

She stands nearly a foot over me in high heels, with leathery skin that holds a slight orange-ish tinge. Her hair resembles a cat that had been stuffed into a dryer, and then stuck to her head. I stand there, wide-eyed and mouth agape. All the words slip out and fall to the ground, leaving me speechless. The woman glares, irritated. She asks, "Can I help you?"

"I-I-I Y-yes. May 21st. Cassandra Whi-no not white, Black. 1985, like the color. I need the-- need a refill." The words spew out in an incoherent jumble and the woman just stares.

"Uhhh, so a refill then?" she types my information into the mainframe and tells me it will be about 20 minutes, so I decide to go shopping for my cleaning supplies.

I grab hydrogen peroxide, paper towels, a scrub brush, and a little air freshener that smells like apple pie. I like apple pie, it's my favorite of all the pies; the apples and cinnamon fused into a perfect intoxicating aroma. Maybe Wendy's has some apple pies I can buy – my stomach gurgles at the notion.

I take my basket of stuff and head to the front of the store. I always use the self-checkout lines because they don't judge you if you mutter to yourself, or ask you questions to try and sneak inside your mind like that monster of a woman. If I swipe my card fast enough, the machines won't even notice I'm there. Although I crouch down a bit to be sure, just enough so I don't look completely nuts, but enough that the machine's eyes can't see me.

This world didn't use to be such a suspicious place. I used to be just like any other person, oblivious to the spies and buzzards; blending in to the world and working myself up just like every other worker bee in the hive of society. At the time, I wanted to go into biology. I always loved animals, but I hated school. The schedules were too confined, and the teachers unrelenting. I managed to make it all the way through high school and into my first year of college before dropping out. Even before my symptoms began, I hated the rules and the demands. After a while, they became impossible.

Chris and I met right before the symptoms started and tore my life wide open. He was working on his degree in engineering and was always sympathetic to my needs from the start. Chris was always the nurturer, with a slightly neurotic temperament that matched mine. I loved him almost instantly and, for some reason, he loved me back.

Four grueling years were spent figuring out what was happening to me and trying to find out which medication worked. A couple prescriptions made me feel like I was walking through a swamp, while others felt like I had been hit over the head with a jackhammer or buried in concrete. It took a while, but we finally found the right dosage. After that, I managed to go back to school to finish my Associates degree. I lost interest in biology and changed my major to my true passion: the art world. Chris proposed to me in a museum, in front of a couple made of two bold lines embracing. The couple's red lips stood out from the white canvas before us. Chris helped me discover my aspirations – which is why I really need to remember why he was so mad.

“Cassandra Black. Please return to pharmacy, your order is ready. Cassandra Black, please return to pharmacy.” The overhead speaker blares, making me jump in surprise. I grab my bags and obey the voice.

I head back over to the pharmacy to grab my medication. The monster-lady hands me my prescription and smiles mechanically, telling me to have a wonderful Saturday. I stare at her and quickly walk away; she won't get into my mind that easily.

As soon as I leave the store, I open the pill bottle and take the recommended dose. I can feel the relief of the medication trickle into my veins and the hazy pressure begins to lift. It is probably just a placebo effect, but I already felt better. I start to feel like the old me, the one who went to college for a degree in science and left with one in art. I never felt like a different person completely on or off the drugs. Rather, when I'm off them, I can feel the world pressing down upon

me, watching me at every turn and waiting for me to fail. With them I feel... normal again – well normal for me, which is still a little out there.

It is more like being attacked by a flock of seagulls. There are hundreds of different birds all swooping at you and cawing in your ears so much that you can't think or feel anything but those birds. Then, suddenly, they stop and find something of more interest, and you find yourself on a beach. But the beach seems so much more real and beautiful than when you first got there. You can hear the waves and feel the sand between your toes. See the blue-green of the ocean touch the softer blue of the sky. You can still hear and see the seagulls in the distance but they seem almost harmless now. The scratches leave scars but they can start to heal.

My stomach gurgles, bringing me back to the present.

“Cassie? Is that you?” I hear the sharp shill voice that is Rebecca and turn around grudgingly. Rebecca is Chris' sister. Her bleach blond hair is curled perfectly over her soft shoulders, and she is wearing a sports tank top and yoga pants that painfully cling to her legs. She stuffs her wallet into a backpack along with a bag of vegetables and vitamins. Always the athlete.

I never liked Rebecca; she seems nice on the surface, but I always feel slimy after talking to her. Her bright disposition oozes like an oily puddle. She is always trying to pry Chris and me apart, throwing backhanded insults my way when she thinks Chris won't notice. She never thought I was worthy for her brother. She even had the gall to say so at our wedding reception; she was particularly plastered that night. They weren't the closest of siblings, but she lived nearby, so he always felt obligated to try and mend fences on holidays and have monthly dinners.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at home painting?”

“I spilled some paint” I reply, a smile pasted on my face.

“Oh, well I stopped by your place a little bit ago to check in on you. Chris called, he was worried about you, said something about a fight and wanted to make sure you were all right, but your neighbor said you had left. Quite a bit of unnecessary hassle, if you ask me. You seem fine enough,” she says, glancing at her watch.

“I am, it was nothing.” I respond. I want this conversation to end so I can get back and clean. No way I am going to let her into my house, I will never hear the end of it. “Just a little squabble, I was going to grab

some Wendy's before heading back, do you want some?" I know she hates all things fast food.

"Ew, no. That stuff will kill you... Well I'll tell him you were fine. I'd offer you a ride but I ran here, soo... see you later I guess. Buh Bye!" she turns and runs off in the opposite direction, her backpack bounces up and down awkwardly as she jogs.

My stomach gurgles once more.

I grab some Wendy's from next door: four cheeseburgers (two extra-large with one pickle on each) and extra fries. I juggle the bags to a manageable weight and start walking home, still counting my steps. It was almost like a lullaby to me now, ingrained into my psyche, a permanent scar, but a manageable one. People are still staring at me, but I think it is because of all the bags I am carrying, not my counting. I am pretty sure I am counting in my head this time, so I pick up the pace just in case.

I wave to Kathy as I climb up each step, she offers to help with the bags, but I waved her off. I can't let her see the mess. I open the front door, shutting it quickly behind me so Kathy won't see, and I feel the eyes on my back fade away.

Immediately I can smell the red paint from the entryway, still slightly wet surprisingly. The house is deathly quiet; I can practically hear the redness from the other room as I set my bags down. A chill runs along my spine and I feel like I stepped into a horror film. I place the food on the dining room table and get to work.

I place the soaked washcloth in the washer and start to clean up the mess. It is hard work; the red really seeped into the beige carpet. Beige, maze, phase, raze. Well, I guess it's now beige with a couple random splotches of soon-to-be-faded red, a watered down coffee color. I wish it smelled like coffee. That's the only problem with painting: the smell. It's like nail polish mixed with copper pennies.

As I clean, I work on remembering the fight from earlier. I had practically fallen out of bed that morning to paint my design, I grabbed my paint buckets and brushes and headed into the kitchen to see Chris already placing his orange vest on for his job. He was yelling into his phone. He hates working Saturdays because they're our days. He looked like a Cheese-It box and I giggled but he just mumbled and yelled at me to stop laughing and stormed out the door, his rusty aura was stagnant in the room. I hate when he does that. I can never get away with it, so why can he? Heated, I chucked the paint can after him;

only after it left my fingertips did I realize the cap was loose. The red spilled everywhere. Red, red, red. It would be pretty if it weren't so stinky. I need a better smelling red...

It takes a while, but I finally manage to get the red out of the carpet and off the walls. The last remaining remnants are only visible if you squint really hard right in front of the window and tilt your head slightly. I think I'm safe from anyone doing that. The relief of a clean house washes over me, making me feel wholly in control once more.

My stomach growls angrily at me and I remember I still haven't eaten. I grab a plate for me and set one on the dining room table for Chris. I'm unsure when he will be getting home, so I put his cheeseburgers in the fridge, stealing a couple of fries on the way – it's not like he will notice... He never actually counts the fries, just threatens to. I sit down in front on the couch to enjoy my meal.

Saturday is not a great day to watch cable; it's all re-runs and sitcoms. I grab the remote and pop in a movie. The Fisher King – my favorite.

About thirty minutes into the movie I hear the front door jingle. I hear a loud stomping sound from outside, as the door slowly creaks open. The noise stops and is replaced by a slight clinking and thumping noises in the entryway. A shadow creeps around the corner and spills onto the carpet, changing it from its normal beige to a more French-y color.

My neck snaps up, and I look over to see Chris walking in. He doesn't look very happy.

"Why's the floor all wet?" he asks.

I looked at him and simply said, "Red."

He gives me a weird look, "My socks are all wet..." yanking off his socks, he throws them towards the direction of our bedroom and looks at the covered wall. "And the mirror?"

"Oh... I'd forgotten about that," I glance towards the covered mirror.

"Oookayyy..." he takes down the quilt, and I see myself nestled on the couch, mid-bite. I quickly put the burger down.

"You doing okay today?" He cracks a concerned smile and shakes his head, his hair flops wildly and some of it sticks to his forehead. He looks best when he does that, but I don't tell him. Instead, I answer his question with an emphatic yes. He laughs and apologizes for having to work. I tell him I bought food.

He walks over to the fridge and nukes the cheeseburgers before plopping down on the couch beside me. He stinks like dirt and sawdust, but I find it oddly comforting. It reminds me of a warm fireplace and a soft bed after a long cross-country plane ride. Chris is the one person in the world who sees me for me. He doesn't treat me like a violent invalid, someone who is ready to snap at any second. He doesn't order me around. He lets me be me. He lets me deal with the buzzards myself. He lets me chase them away when they threaten to overwhelm my senses.

I feel the hollowness return, and fill with warm soothing liquid. The world is a cruel place, full of shadows and darkness that threaten to consume me when I'm alone, but it's in the simple moments like these that I find I am closest to my real self.

I take another bite of my burger and return my attention to the movie, smiling at my perfectly imperfect bubble.