



*Dreams come true, Buddy,* that's what he said. Mister Drew was no liar. Problem is, yeah, dreams do come true. But so do nightmares. Package deal.

I didn't understand any of that for a long time, to be honest. Dreams came true? For who? Rich folks, sure. But my family? Dreams were quick breaks between working your hands to the bone every day.

I wish I could really capture what the Lower East Side was like the summer of 1946. I wish I could draw a picture of it: the sidewalks melting into the street and seeping into the sewer grates, steam squiggle lines rising up toward a harsh white sky, big fat juicy drops of water coming off folks' foreheads. Maybe the word "sizzle" floating in the air.

But I can't draw it. I have to tell it.

I'm trying to remember what I learned from you, Dot. How to write a good story. I have to remember what you used to say. To use all the five senses, not just sight.

Writing isn't drawing.

The five senses. What are the other four again?

Right.

Sound: kids laughing and yelling at one another, adults shouting, glass breaking and then the sound of fists on flesh. Fights always happened when it got this hot. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, and the brain doesn't work—turns to pink sloppy mush inside your skull, sloshing around and ready to pour out your ears.

Touch: Your skin was always slick with sweat and everything under your fingers felt wet because you were wet. There was no way to feel dry.

Smell: The air was always stale and still, unable to go up over the sides of the tall tenement buildings. It mostly smelled of piss. Made you want to throw up. Sometimes you did throw up. Oh! That's another one. The smell of throw-up.

Taste:

Taste:

Sorry, I can't remember the taste right now. It's too hard. All I can taste is the bitter in my mouth. That lingering taste of ink.

Okay, so you get it. It was hot. And it matters you understand that, because I would have done anything to get out of this kind of hot, out of this neighborhood. I'd been running between sweatshops for a couple of years now. Ever since Pa died. Ma had taken over sewing the precut fabrics together, and I had dropped out of school and taken over for my cousin Lenny, delivering the finished suits and jackets to the boss,

Mr. Schwartz. And then, you know, delivering the new pieces to Ma so she could do it all over again. We needed the cash. And it was the only way I could make Ma smile. I miss that.

Ma's smile. Gentle. Calm. Warm. The kind that reached all the way to her eyes.

Not like his smile. Not like his smile at all.

Anyway, I got paid, which was important.

But I was almost seventeen now, and most of the other boys were just turning twelve and it felt stupid to be so old doing this job, and so when Mr. Schwartz suggested I be his go-to delivery guy, and explained I'd get to leave the neighborhood to travel all over the city, I said yes. There was green in other parts of the city. Trees and stuff. And the fancy neighborhoods didn't smell like piss. And when I brought a finished suit to the Upper East Side, I could take a walk in the park and dip my feet in the boat lake.

More important than any of that, I could watch the artists along the mall drawing pictures for tourists. Cartoons. I could watch them closely.

This is where the problems started.

First off, evidently artists are temperamental.

"Hey, kid, what do you think you're doing?"

"Just watching, sir." Maybe this time I'd got a bit nearer to the canvas than usual.

"Get out of here with your watching!"

It was like getting to go to art school, except I bet at art school the teachers don't chase you away and tell you you're

scaring off the customers because you're hovering too close.

But that wasn't the biggest thing. See, something I haven't said, because I guess you know by now, is I'm an artist. Well, now. Then I wasn't. But I wanted to be. Not sure why; maybe it had something to do with my grandfather I'd never met. Who was still back in Poland. I figured he must love art. After all, the one big thing he'd saved and sent with Ma from "the old country," as she called it, was those darn paintings. People always were super surprised to see these huge oil paintings in a small tenement apartment. She could've sold them. For a lot of money. But she didn't. And that always stayed with me.

I started by drawing sketches late at night, sleeping in and being late for class. Then I got sent to the principal's office a lot for "doodling" during the day, and, boy, I loved the funny pages. I'd run around the neighborhood, collecting discarded newspapers, hoping to read the latest Popeye or Dick Tracy. I even started drawing comics, making up adventures with Olive Oyl, Pruneface, Sparkle Plenty. Soon I was inventing my own characters. They weren't funny. I didn't show them to anyone.

But then I found the artists in Central Park. And, let's just say, I got distracted.

"You lost the suit?" Mr. Schwartz could be pretty scary for a man who was only five feet tall.

"I'm sorry, sir! I swear it'll never happen again!" I'd only put it down for a second to get a closer look at a drawing, but that was enough time for someone else to be sneaky and scoop it up.

"What about last time, when you were three hours late?"

My client almost didn't make it to his appointment on time."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"You want to be my apprentice? You want to make a good, honest living?"

I did, I really did. I needed the cash. We, my ma and I, needed the cash. And no one would hire some teenager from the slums who barely had an education. To be Mr. Schwartz's right-hand man, that was more than I could have hoped for. Boy, I felt stupid. And ashamed.

"One more chance, Buddy, one more and then that's it."

One more chance.

This was my one last chance.

Then I met *him*.

When I first went to his studio to deliver him his suit, the clothing bag slung over my right shoulder, there had been a blackout 'cause of the heat. Not just in the studio's tall brick building, but also in the rest of the neighborhood. The flashing lights on the theater marquees were still, and as I passed by the dark sign for *St. Louis Woman*, two stagehands were staring up at the building, hands on hips, toothpicks dangling out of their mouths.

"Now what, Steve?"

"Show must go on."

"That's what they say, alright."

It hadn't really clicked in my mind there'd been a blackout until a few blocks later west when I passed a theater off Broadway and finally arrived at the studio next door. I'd been

super focused getting there, but I was already late. This time it wasn't my fault. It was the subway, I swear. But Mr. Schwartz wouldn't know the difference. I had to make up the time, so I was walking fast and not really noticing much of the world around me. But when I stepped into the muddy dark it jarred me back to reality. And I stopped and just stood there. It was so black you couldn't really tell which way was up.

Then, suddenly, it was super bright, like someone was shining a light right at me. I held up my hand and the light flew off my face and I watched as the beam scanned the room until it found a gray-haired older woman sitting behind a huge desk. I jumped, surprised to see her just appear like that.

"Gosh dangit, Norman," she said, squeezing her eyes shut behind the lenses of her oversized glasses.

"Projector's gone out," said Norman in a gruff voice.

"In case you hadn't noticed, the power is out everywhere. Get that flashlight out of my eyes!" There was a pause. And then everything went black again with a click.

Blacker, I should say. Blacker. After the glare from the direct light it was like not just the flashlight was turned off, but my eyes too. Gave me shivers up my spine.

I didn't know what to do. I had to deliver this suit already. I thought I could remember where the desk was, so maybe I could just stumble toward it?

"Who's the kid?" asked Norman from somewhere.

"I don't know, Norman." There was the sound of a match scratching a surface and then that *womph* of a flame coming alive.