

THEY TELL ME I'M A PAINTER

Written by

Jacques Manjarrez

INT. BRICK ROOM

Fade in.

Open to a large, brick room dimly lit only by the natural lights emanating from the windows. Door open as KAREN strolls in - lugging with her an easel, a canvas, and a plethora of art supplies. She is in her early twenties, dressed dishevelled with matted hair. Her expression is as apathetic as her attire. KAREN props the easel up in the center of the room and sets the canvas atop it. She then lays out around her a rainbow of oil pigments. Preparations complete, KAREN goes back to facing the blank canvas in front of her. She grabs her palette and dips a brush into the oils.

MAUD (V.O)

Mark is coming over. Just thought you should know, he's going to be staying with us for a while. Little while, long while, I don't really know.

KAREN spreads a series of pigments across the canvas.

MAUD (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Anything to say about that? Any objections at all? You know I'm your sister, right? You can tell me. You can tell me anything. Tell me that doesn't really love me. Tell me he'll just keep hurting me. Tell me I'm being irrational or stupid or something. Please - please say something.

(shouting)

Fucking talk!

KAREN splatters red over the canvas.

INT. METRO CAR - NIGHT

KAREN sits alone in an empty metro car. She is fully dressed in a heavy coat and a camper backpack. She fondles in one hand a photograph of her and her sister MAUD, embracing on the Chicago pier.

EXT. CHICAGO - NEXT MORNING

KAREN emerges from an alleyway - hair frazzled. She rubs her eyes and looks around a bustling city street. She begins navigating the city as if she's spent a lifetime there.

At one point she stops outside a hot-dog stand servicing local blue-collar workers. She checks her wallet for loose change and manages to collect a few dollars which she uses to purchase a hot-dog.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT - A LITTLE LATER

KAREN sits adjacent a trash bin in a wide alley way between two tall brick buildings. Across from her, painted on the wall is a grand spray-painted mural. KAREN eats her hot-dog, bundled up in her heavy coat, admiring the mural. A worker from a nearby building walks into the alleyway carrying a large trash bag. He dumps it into the trash bin before noticing KAREN absolutely captivated by the mural. The worker takes one look at KAREN and the mural both before shaking his head and heading back to work.

EXT. BOARDWALK - NOON

KAREN walks a boardwalk on the city's pier. Children and adults alike explore the carnival on the boardwalk, innocently indulging in some games and cotton candy without a care in the world.

She finds a point on the pier that appears to be the exact location the photograph of her and her sister was taken. Wandering back, she sees a caricature artist's station - complete with sketch paper, several different inks, and an easel. The only thing the station seems to be lacking in any form is a caricature artist.

KAREN slowly approaches the station, rapidly looking up and down the boardwalk, searching for the potential owner of the stall. Seeing no one, KAREN slips behind the easel and begins inspecting the artist's tools, pencils and brushes, conveniently placed in a box besides the easel. Among the tools she finds a stack of loose sketches. She hastily searches through the sketches to find a series of cartoon caricatures of random people. She flips through the stack of caricatures when a particular sketch catches her eye. It stands out as being distinct in style and tone from the rest of the caricatures. As she analyzes the image, a giggling couple of young adults stand waiting to have their portrait drawn. The couple is GREG and SUSIE.

GREG

(to SUSIE)

- I want to see him on a stage.

SUSIE

The thing is, I don't know if he knows that we know what he really meant with that thing he said.

GREG

Yes, yes. Oh my God, yes.

KAREN looks up from the picture at the young couple.

GREG seats himself on a stool on the other side of the canvas, and SUSIE sits endearingly beside him. They both giggle as they put on their best smiles for the portrait.

KAREN slowly makes her way to the soapbox facing the canvas. She grabs some pencils and markers from the artist's toolbox and sits herself across the couple with the canvas in between. Taking a passing glance at the couple, she sets her pencil against the canvas and begins drawing. She begins with preliminary sketches - wide arcs and simple geometric shapes are drawn with thin graphite to get the correct proportions.

SUSIE

(to KAREN)

Sorry, is it okay if I tilt my head a little bit? Honestly, I just want you to fully capture the sheer size and scale of these ears.

(gestures to GREG's ears)

GREG

They're pretty hard to miss.

SUSIE

I call him Dumbo with his big, stupid Dumbo ears.

GREG

You see what you've done? Now all the caricaturists in Chicago are going to know about my big, dumb, Dumbo ears.

Both chuckle. KAREN looks from around the board at the two of them. She stares until the two stop laughing out of discomfort. Only then does KAREN get back to the drawing.

SUSIE

What's your name?

KAREN

Karen.

GREG

You like to draw, Karen?

KAREN grabs a piece of charcoal from the toolkit and, to the couple's concern, starts vigorously rubbing it all over the piece.

GREG (CONT'D)

Ooh - getting a little aggressive there.

She begins quickly alternating between artistic tools, including ink pens, markers, and even a few splashes from a half-emptied water bottle on the floor. When the piece is finally completed to KAREN's standards and she is satisfied, she passes the couple the finished drawing. GREG takes it skeptically. Upon seeing the drawing, their expressions turn into a combination of delight, horror, and fascination. The drawing shows an incredibly detailed drawing of the couple, holding each other's hands while tendrils work to pull them apart. KAREN taps a price sign adjacent the stand.

KAREN

Twenty-five.

GREG reaches into his wallet and pulls out twenty-five dollars which he promptly hands to KAREN. Just as the couple start making their way away from the booth, staring contemplatively at the piece, they pass another couple that happens to catch a glimpse of the piece in question. The new couple looks towards KAREN's stand as she pockets the money.

EXT. BOARDWALK - TWILIGHT

The carnival is closing up just as KAREN finishes up her last portrait for a family. Once she is paid, she places the money atop a stack of bills that she had accumulated in a tin box near the canvas. As she places the last bills of the day into the box, she removes the mysterious sketch she was investigating earlier. She sits contemplatively on the soapbox, staring deeply into the sketch.

Unbeknownst to her, the artist stands beside her, having returned to his stand as she admires the drawing. The artist is REGGIE, a burly man sporting a vest and a beret.

REGGIE

Thoughts?

KAREN turns around to see REGGIE looking over her shoulder, opening a can of cheap beer.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
 Ideas? Opinions? Criticism,
 constructive or corrosive?

KAREN
 It's good.

REGGIE
 Good, right? A little Francis
 Bacon, a little Munch, all Reggie.
 That's me. I'm Reggie.

KAREN leans downwards and picks up the stack of twenties - her earnings. She clips through them and picks out a few bills that she stuffs into her pocket and the remainder she gives to REGGIE. He whistles with delight.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
 You earned this?

KAREN nods.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
 Where have you been all my life?

REGGIE counts the twenties. He finishes off his beer and takes five of those bills, which he rolls up and inserts into the can. He takes a step outside the booth and, with a winding pitch, throws the can off the side of the boardwalk, into the ocean below. He then pockets the remainder.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
 You hungry?

INT. DINER - NIGHT

REGGIE and KAREN sit across each other in a window booth at a diner. REGGIE is fully invested in his meal, while KAREN sketches on the check.

REGGIE
 (in-between bites)
 -And it's fine when it's just
 balloon animals, right? Just those -
 have you seen them? And people are
 like, "okay, Jeff Koons - I get
 your drift". But this - what this
 guy does is he employs a factory of
 small, Burmese orphans do sculpt
 literal life-size pornography of
 him banging this fucking adult film
 star.

(MORE)

REGGIE (CONT'D)

And, you know, it's hot - don't get me wrong - but I'm not going to take it out in the MoMA, yeah? This isn't the fucking Arts Institute, there are - there are rules in place so that people don't do exactly that, and believe me, I know. You have no idea how many times I see a Rothko and it turns me on something awful, yeah? Like, Jesus Christ - guy's got me sweating beads.

REGGIE whistles and takes a few more bites from his meal. The WAITER comes over. Reggie gestures at his mug.

REGGIE (CONT'D)

(to waiter)

Full city.

(back to KAREN)

What about you? Your favorite?

Wait, don't tell me: Basquiat.

The waiter pours REGGIE another mug. He eyes the check.

KAREN

Bob Ross.

REGGIE

(chuckling)

Bob Ross. That's - that's funny.

You're pretty funny. Bob Ross.

(beat) Where's your family?

KAREN

Away.

REGGIE takes a sip of coffee.

REGGIE

Hey, can I, uh, can I interest you in a kind of summer internship opportunity?

KAREN raises her gaze from her sketch.

EXT. BOARDWALK - MIDDAY, A FEW MONTHS LATER

KAREN sits at the caricature artist's booth, drawing a pair of friends. In front of the booth is a collection of her caricatures, showcasing her eccentrically expressive style using a wide variety of mediums. REGGIE sits off to the side in a camping chair, sipping beer.

Upon receiving her pay from the friends, REGGIE hands KAREN his empty beer can, where she inserts some of her earnings and then proceeds to throw the can into the lake.

REGGIE

What are you doing? That was, like, twelve.

KAREN

I'm saving for some "Faber-Castell" pens.

REGGIE

Nothing's wrong with the "Microns".

KAREN

That what you tell your girlfriend?

REGGIE

No.

KAREN sits to draw her next patrons, which happen to be a pair of sisters, GEORGIA and HELEN. They both look slightly peeved at each other.

GEORGIA

I'm not - I'm not saying I'm angry.

HELEN

- But you are.

GEORGIA

Well, I have every right to be angry, don't I? Can you just, like, stop talking for one second so we can just get this over with? Okay?

HELEN

I mean, you're the one arguing.

KAREN spares them a concerned glance, but keeps drawing. GEORGIA puts on a wide smile, as HELEN remains straight-faced.

GEORGIA

Okay, what the hell is your problem?

HELEN

I don't feel like smiling.

GEORGIA

This is literally for mom and dad -
do you really just have to be so
fucking selfish all the time?

HELEN

Did you seriously just call me
fucking selfish? You know what-

KAREN violently tears the portrait off the easel.

KAREN

Twenty five.

The sisters stare at their caricature, a portrait of both of
them with joyous smiles spread across their face.

EXT. BOARDWALK - LATER THAT EVENING

KAREN sits at the caricature station fondling the photograph
of her and her sister. Although she retains for the most part
her stoic exterior, she seems to carry a sense of longing as
she gingerly touches the face of her sister. REGGIE seems to
be absent from his chair.

As people begin to disperse in mass from the board-walk, one
individual approaches KAREN's station. OPPA carries herself
like a modern-day Warhol. It is apparent that she borrowed
some of her aesthetic at the very least. She sits herself in
front of the station and crosses her legs.

KAREN

We're closed.

OPPA nods - face stern. She glances at some of KAREN's work
examples.

OPPA

You keep your heart on your pallet,
don't you?

KAREN ignores her, eyes focussed on her photograph.

OPPA (CONT'D)

The thing is, unless you're a
sociopath, you feel - yeah? If you
can vocalize these feelings, you
talk. Ourselves, the less
fortunate, we paint.

KAREN glances up at OPPA, who pulls out a business card.
KAREN reaches out and takes it. It reads: OPPA DURK;
ADMISSIONS AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS.

OPPA (CONT'D)

I've been watching you. You have talent - technical talent. But you're whispering. These guys - these guys teach you how to shout.

OPPA meets KAREN's gazes of astonishment. She then stands and exits down the pier. KAREN follows her with her eyes, dumbfounded. REGGIE approaches her from behind, eating a hot dog.

REGGIE

What was that?

KAREN

Recruiter.

REGGIE

Hoo-rah. What branch?

KAREN

- Academy of Fine Arts.

REGGIE

The magic word is conscientious objector... Wait, what?

INT. REGGIE'S FLAT - EVENING

KAREN sits at a small coffee table. Adjacent her are is an open laptop with the school's application page pulled up. Her attention is focussed on a plethora of drawings and sketches laid out in front of her. She's finishing one drawing with a light pencil. REGGIE bursts in from the front door with a large portfolio under one arm and a small flash drive in the other hand.

REGGIE

Guy at Kinko's said you've got potential, in case you needed the ego boost.

REGGIE tosses KAREN the USB drive. KAREN catches it, eyes focussed on her sketching.

REGGIE (CONT'D)

God damn, it's hot in here.

Reggie walks over to Karen's table and turns on a fan atop the desk. The fan vibrates violently before wobbling off the table and shattering. Karen ignores this.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
How far are you?

KAREN
Just finished the supplement.

REGGIE
Good, that was the hard part. What
else do you need?

KAREN hands REGGIE the laptop. REGGIE paces around the room,
reading the screen.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
Your birth certificate? Jesus
Christ, who's the dean of
admissions - McCarthy?

REGGIE looks over to KAREN - face stoic as usual. An
expression of sympathy overcomes him as he realizes what she
now must do.

REGGIE (CONT'D)
Do you want me to come with?

KAREN shakes her head no.

INT. METRO CAR - AFTERNOON

KAREN stands in a heavy coat in a packed metro car. She
stares dead forward - her expression remains stern.

MAUD (V.O.)
I can tell you're not happy. You
don't have to show it - I've known
you long enough. Mom always said
that even as a baby, you never
cried - that you were never much
one to speak your mind.

EXT. KAREN'S CHILDHOOD HOME - TWILIGHT

KAREN walks up the sidewalk of her childhood street. A few
innocent kids are drawing with chalk in the middle of the
road right in front of her old childhood home. The sight of
her house stops her dead in her tracks. The house has become
a main attraction for urban exploration. The lawn is
overgrown and house deteriorated.

MAUD (V.O.)

She said that was okay though, that I had enough voice for the both of us. But I could never speak for you, Karen.

A yellow plastic tape is wrapped around the site of her home. The line reads: "CRIME SCENE - DO NOT CROSS". KAREN ducks under the barrier tape.

INT. KAREN'S CHILDHOOD HOME - IMMEDIATELY AFTER

It's dark. Cobwebs cover walls floor to ceiling. KAREN retracts her birth certificate from a pile of papers left in a drawer. On her way out, something in the kitchen catches her eye. On the floor of the kitchen, the silhouette of a feminine figure is spread out across the floor. KAREN steps over it, and stands stoically facing a rusted fridge. A magnet on the fridge pins a crude crayon stick-figure drawing of KAREN and her sister MAUD together, smiling. It's signed "FROM KAREN, TO MAUD. LOVE YOU, SIS!"

MAUD (V.O.)

Your feelings were just deeper. Much deeper. For you, it was never about being happy or sad. For you, emotion was like color. And you...

KAREN puts her back against the wall opposite the refrigerator. She slides down to sit by the silhouette.

KAREN gazes up at the drawing.

INT. BRICK ROOM - MODERN DAY

KAREN sets down her paintbrush after adding the finishing touches of her final piece. She removes her earphones and steps back to inspect her masterpiece - a melody of colors and lines representing a wide variety of different mediums - showing her and her sister embracing exactly as in the photograph.

MAUD (V.O.)

Well what can I say, sis? You're a painter.

Close-up on KAREN's face. KAREN smiles.

Cut to black.

End.