

Maria Lim

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Stanford Online High School, Redwood City, CA

Educator: Farnoosh Fathi

Category: Short Story

Ms. X

Ms. X

Ms. X was our art teacher.

“Our” because we loved her, “was” because she’s no longer an art teacher, but an inmate at a certain correctional facility upstate.

It’s been a decade since her arrest.

10 years.

Really, I should be over it at this point. I’m so much older now, living that proper adult life – Best Retirement Plans For You, nine to five, yes ma-am, working on my student loans, housing prices have indeed been soaring, how’s the baby?

I was 16 when we met Ms. X. I was just some teenager – ruddy face, off-kilter manner, often inebriate in class – with a habit of scoffing sanctimoniously at anything and everything yet secretly ready to latch, like a desperate leech, onto anyone who’d offer at least a dram of parental understanding.

A very difficult girl, my grandmother used to say.

But as difficult as she is, she still lives somewhere within me – perhaps in some clammy basement that you can only get into through a hidden staircase – and all her pain and face-clawing horror dwells in it, floating with the dust motes, visible when the light hits right.

I thought of Ms. X as a little lamb, a cloudless sky, a child’s drawing with a pie slice of the yellow sun in the corner. She smiled at us with her celadon, comma-like eyes – two aventurine drops – and we smiled back, pin-eyed and doped up by a sympathy we’ve never known, tasting it out like an exotic dish that soon had to be injected like an opioid.

Our parents, poised bankers and executives, were established but emotionless glaciers who couldn’t quite find the right approach to the youthful, desiring mess that we were – all they knew was a world of restraint and silent wealth; their “I love you” was a new wristwatch and summer in Switzerland.

Not to say they didn’t love us. They did, without a doubt, but they loved us in their own way, and when you’re sixteen, you want everyone to love you in *your* way.

And so our void of childlike wanting multiplied endlessly, and then Ms. X came and loved us in *our* way and was like one of our own and laughed at our jokes and was all agog when we told her about video games and pop stars and trashy TV shows and everything in between and did not cast that peremptory shadow of derision, that So Sad A Young Lady Like You Should Concern Herself With Such Junk frown that was so characteristic of most adults. Ms. X wasn’t like them – she replicated our adolescent buzz, copied our gestures, showed us cool little art tricks and was of an uncanny talent, so dexterous and rhythmic we’d often ask for way more help than necessary on our art just to see her magic at work.

She was *just* like us. We were all so sick with malaise, so worn out by the perpetual pedestal all adults seemed to be fastened to – I’m Not Your Friend, Don’t Talk To Me Like That – so despaired by the perennial gap between us, that someone like Ms. X – fun-loving and a little wild, who let us curse and blast all sorts of songs in her classroom – seemed like a god, and we thought, why can’t our parents be like that? They always had an air of constraint around them and a remarkable ability to beleaguer us even in the best of our moods; their inaccessible, unthawable love wasn’t pretty, and being the artfully spoiled sixteen-year-olds that we were, we equated love with prettiness. This dizzying landscape of understanding that Ms. X so wroughtly painted in our years together had such a

dimensional verisimilitude, a Flemish school trompe-l'œil, that we thought there couldn't be anything more real, more true than this. We hung onto her in hallways, in cafeterias, in the teachers' lounge, Good morning Ms. X, just wanted to drop by to say hi, what a beautiful scarf you have, Oh you won't believe what happened to me yesterday, and many other disconsolate excuses to talk: a previously dormant hunger to be heard, to be listened to, was spilling out of us like water from an overflowing pitcher.

One thing we loved to tell Ms. X about was our trivial yet acrid arguments with moms, dads, friends, family members, list out the myriads of their flaws, no one understands me, my life sucks. She'd listen carefully, but we never, ever conferred, never had an actual discussion – all she did was say that we were right and everyone else was wrong; no mention of how our parents actually want the best for us and we just don't see it yet, how they deny us sweets because they don't want our teeth to rot.

And amidst all this cloying beauty and bloom of flowers, we never noticed the skull beside.

And when I, by pure accident, while rummaging through silver tubes of Winsor & Newtons, found two small still life paintings (examples for other classes, probably) of an eerie identity – every speck on an apple, every dusty pellicle of a single grape reflected, as if in a mirror – I didn't find any of it strange or at least slightly conspicuous, but instead was struck by the resplendence and clearly polished skill. That's how it was with Ms. X : she offered beauty and pink glitter and ribbons – everything how we wanted it – and we were full and happy and felt loved, and no one ever thought to question her provenance: who was she *before* us, *before* we met?

Truth, as ugly as it is, is that she didn't love – or even like – neither art nor us, we were but a prop that added color to her perfect, ad-like story: a nice little teacher teaching art at an expensive high school, wears hippie clothes, many plants in apartment, kids love her, colleagues love her, the end.

Even her lifestyle was an imitation.

Then one brilliant fall morning, not too different from many other brilliant fall mornings, we went to school, giddy and patiently awaiting our art class – we were going to make some motley newspaper collages that day, not sure why we found the idea so thrilling – but Ms. X wasn't there. No one knew why – there were no telling signs, no warning, no explanation or even premonition of any sort. After about thirty minutes of darting eyes and shushing noises, the school principal, Mrs. Allen – as stiff and straight as an exclamation mark – walked into the classroom, pallid hands trembling aspen-like. Never have I ever seen her this distraught, so on the brink of fainting; she couldn't string two words together and looked around the room helplessly – first at us, then at the stained easels in the back, then at us again.

At one point Mrs. Allen stopped her tremulous perusing, sat down on a nearby chair, retrieved a handkerchief from the pocket of her blazer and dabbed her temples, which were damp from perspiration, and I don't remember much more from that day (and do not wish to), only that a green-haired girl behind me had to be escorted to the nurse's office due to a “severely distressed state”.

In the following weeks, even after Ms. X was tried in court, we walked around in a lifeless trance, feeling everything from ignominy to stupefying terror – we loved her so much, and she turned out to be a monster? We knew nothing about her, and she knew everything about us? How assured we all were that Ms. X and us, her beloved students, were equal, that our openness was reciprocated and our shared susceptibility two-sided when in reality there was absolutely nothing we truly knew about her: everything we thought was her was merely a touched-up reflection of us. What happened was that Ms. X's little underworld, with its dim-lit backrooms and basement deals, collapsed on us in some world-shattering seconds, and the blast – like a slap across the face, but of a much greater magnitude – reverberates in my head to this day.

The fact that love, caring, beauty, empathy, and connection could be fabricated was something they wrote about in second-rate romance novels with titles like *Faking It*, but it couldn't happen to me, to us, no, never.

The newspaper collage assignment was postponed until the story was out of print. Incidentally, all we saw, all we could ever see – in kiosks, on benches in parks, overflowing on the stands, staring back at us from trash cans, gas stations, 7 Elevens – were the sneering what's-your-face Times or Posts or Chronicles, and in an ominously large font, on the very first page, the words:

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER BEHIND \$2 MILLION IN FORGED PAINTINGS: A DECADE-OLD ART FORGERY SCHEME

Perhaps the greatest art crime since the 1990 Gardner Museum theft.