

“A Cut-out Face”/ Tipper

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YA short story

“A Cut-out Face”

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

I don't see her on the bike path until the snow melts. Then, there she is. A cut-out face—razor sharp, black and white spray-paint on pavement—the word “Persuade” printed underneath. I don't stop. Why would I stop for some painted face?

Her big dark eyes follow me as I walk on by, and that word stays in my head all the rest of the way to school. Stuck there like some dumb little kid song. Some stupid commercial. Persuade. Per...su...ade.

Persuade...who?

*Persuade you,*

*Boy.*

*Should I?*

*Advise you?*

*Urge you?*

*Induce you*

*To believe?*

*Hey, convince me and maybe*

*I'll try*

*To convince*

*You...*

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

She’s still there when I walk home later. Being painted on pavement will do that to a girl.

I can see the edge of her paint way before I get to her. And there are tons of other kids on the path now. Some on bikes or skateboards. Most walking, like me. But not alone, like me.

It kinda bugs me how these kids walk over her, or let their wheels roll across her, as if they don’t see her. It’s not like I’ll say anything to them about it, but there is plenty of path. Can’t they...I don’t know...leave her alone?

*Don’t*

*Leave me alone,*

*Boy.*

*No,*

*Take me somewhere*

*Anywhere*

*Everywhere.*

*Just ask.*

*Ask me.*

At dinner, I ask Mom why anyone would paint a face on the bike path with some random word. She gives me her “Owen...can’t you see I’m exhausted?” look. The one that’s as good as her asking me why anyone would bother asking why someone would paint a face on the bike path with some random word.

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

Me and Mom? We don't talk much. That's okay, because when Mom starts talking to me that usually means she wants to move again. Traveling nurses can do that. Move, I mean. Nurses are needed in every corner of this world. That's what Mom says. Since Dad left—what was it—four...five years ago?—we've moved six times. Seven counting this place. Mom always has reasons. “It's too quiet...too noisy...too hot.”

We've been here for two weeks, and I'm just waiting for her to say it's too cold. So, there's no point in getting all comfortable. No point being all Mr. Smiley-face at school.

I don't care. I've got one more year of high school. Then it'll be my reasons all the time. For now? I like to think of myself as kind of like a ninja. Yeah...drop in, stealth around, and then, poof—I'm gone.

*After dark, everyone's gone, but*

*Boy?*

*I know you saw what I left behind.*

*A mark*

*Of me*

*Like a footprint, saying*

*I was here*

*I am here.*

*That's*

*What I mean.*

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

For the next couple of days, I walk by painted girl morning and afternoon—I mean it’s not like I have a choice. That’s why we moved to these condos. So I can stroll down this path and end up at school—easy peasy—that’s what Mom says.

Then, one morning this crazy thing happens. As I walk by painted girl, I look down into her eyes, and “Hey,” pops into my head. Lucky for me I’m alone, because bang—that’s what comes out of my mouth.

“Hey.”

She watches me—the way she does—and I keep walking. Maybe even a little faster. Who is she? Anyone? No one? Do I really want to know?

Nah.

Okay...maybe.

*You know why*

*I like the word*

*Persuade?*

*It’s full*

*Of maybe...*

There are three rules for stealthin’ it at school: In class, sit in the back. In between, plug in ear buds and keep moving. Gotta stop—like maybe to eat or whip off homework?—find some unused corner. Schools have lots of unused corners.

After the weird “Hey” thing with painted girl, I can’t get lost in my ninja gig, though. I’m too busy looking at faces. Is she here? At this school? Somewhere in the

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

halls? If I see her, will I talk to her? Ask her what she means by painting her face on the path? What she means by “Persuade?”

I look hard, catching eyes with people in the hallways, in my classes. I try to imagine what painted girl looks like, you know, unpainted. There’s a girl in my Physics class who maybe looks a little like her, but only if painted girl let her hair grow long. Only if now, painted girl likes to brush this long hair back with her fingers, and tie it in a knot that never stays tied.

Physics-girl catches me looking, and she must think I’m checking her out because her face gets all red. Her eyes aren’t dark, though. No. They’re blue—really, really blue...

I look at every girl I go by, but I don’t see painted girl.

*You can look at my face and not really*

*See me.*

*Close your eyes.*

*Listen.*

*This is what I like about a voice.*

*It can be a boy*

*Or a girl*

*Or*

*Neither.*

*Yeah.*

*Instead of she or he*

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

*Try thinking*

*Ze.*

I always say some kind of “Hi” to painted girl after that. If no one’s around, I go by and give her the quick “Hey,” maybe wave, ask her how she’s doing. If there are other people on the path, I say “Hi” in my head, and give her the old chin lift that says, “No, I’m not blowing you off.”

It’s not like I think she’ll say “Hi” back. I guess it’s a weird superstitious thing, like that line about stepping on a crack and breaking your mother’s back, or the one about picking up a penny and getting good luck all day.

I don’t know why I say “Hi,” I just do.

*I don’t know why*

*You say “Hi,” but*

*If you stop*

*For a second*

*And listen*

*To what I share*

*What I dare*

*You may*

*Find me,*

*Or maybe*

*Not.*

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

I try to find her outside of school, too. At the mall, at the market, around every street corner. Most of me wants to find her; see that painted face as a real face, warm, pink, human, girl. Yeah, I know...I could ask somebody. I could do it sometime when I'm on the path. I could go up to anybody, and say, "Excuse me. See this painted girl over here? Do you know her?"

I don't because the most of me that wants to find her, wants to find her myself. And I don't, because one little bit of me doesn't want to hear what someone else might say about her.

About Angel.

*Angel?*

*Or devil...*

*No matter where I went*

*People got ideas about me.*

*Short dark hair*

*White, white skin*

*Tiny*

*All dressed in black.*

*Goth girl?*

*Emo girl?*

*No way.*

*All in black because*



“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

*In color,*

*I disappear.*

Angel. That’s how I picture her now, kind of like that angel on one shoulder, devil on the other thing, but not really. I mean, Angel isn’t trying to get me to do anything, either good or bad. She sits on my ninja shoulder. Tiny, perfect. Her face—not flat and painted anymore—but pale and warm. Real. At least to me, is all I’m saying.

*All I’m saying is*

*I was as real*

*As you.*

*Now,*

*I’m as real as I*

*Need*

*To be.*

Me and Angel? We have whole conversations, and it’s great because I had no clue how much I needed somebody to talk to. And since I don’t need to move my lips, I can talk to her all the time.

Like right now. I’m in the kitchen, about to make my lunch for school, and Mom is sitting behind me at the kitchen table, drinking her coffee and studying her favorite book—*Rand McNally’s Road Atlas*. Me and Angel can say whatever we want, and I don’t have to bug Mom and she doesn’t have to bug me.

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

Me: What do you think, Angel? PB & J or ham and cheese today?

Angel: Don't you know I'm a vegetarian?

Me: I thought so. You look like a vegetarian.

Angel: What is that supposed to mean?

Me: Nothing. I'm just saying...

Angel: Well, you're right... You? You probably need the ham and cheese.

Me: Now, you're right. It's spooky how well you know me, Angel.

Angel: I know.

“Hey, Owen. You need to get going. You're going to be late.”

Sometimes her voice is so real, I think I hear it out loud.

Me: Right again.

“Did you hear me, Owen?”

Oops. Not Angel, Mom, really talking to me.

“Yeah, I'm going. I—” I twist around and Mom is looking at me, but all I see is her hand resting on a new page of the atlas. A page where we haven't lived yet. A page that's far away from here. Too far away.

“I don't want to move again.”

Mom looks at me. “Oh?” Her eyes get all wide, as if for the first time in years she sees me. “Really? You like it here? You want to stay?”

“Yeah. I want to stay.”

*I want to stay, too,*

*Boy.*

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

*But it's kind of funny when*

*Too late*

*Comes.*

*Turns out,*

*What I thought*

*I wanted*

*Was not*

*What I want.*

*Still...*

*It's*

*What I*

*Got.*

After I tell Mom about wanting to stay, I have to hurry and finish making my lunch because now I am going to be late for school, and I need to talk to Angel. Not just the way I do when she's on my shoulder, but face to face.

By the time I get to the path, it's completely deserted. This is good because I can do something I've never had the nerve to do. Stop and, you know, be there with Angel.

A second after I see her paint, her eyes find me. I crouch down and put my hand on her cheek, touch her hair. She is paint. Only paint on pavement. Gritty. A little wet. No warmth. No breath. Still, there's something in those eyes that holds me.

Me: Is this what you mean by “Persuade?”

Angel: What do you think?

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

Me: I think you’re persuading me to stay.

Angel: How am I doing that?

Me: I don’t know...by making me want something...making me want you.

Angel: Do you really?

Me: Really what?

Angel: Want me?

*I think you do,*

*Boy,*

*Want me...*

*And I don’t know*

*If*

*That makes me*

*Really,*

*Really*

*Happy or*

*Really,*

*Really*

*Sad.*

I stay crouched over her, knowing I should stand up and get myself to school. It’s like a magnet of sad holds me to the ground. Angel is still with me, both looking up at me and sitting on my shoulder, but she’s real quiet now.

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

Then I’m standing. I’m walking to school. I’m pushing through the front doors and getting another late-slip.

I missed homeroom, so I go right to my first class—Physics. I don’t even try to be stealthy. I open the door and go in. The whole class—Mr. Mundie the teacher included—swings my way. I should pat myself on the back at how ninja I’ve been, because at least half the kids look at me like they’ve never seen me before, but I’m not in a ninja kind of mood.

I take my seat in the back, and Mr. Mundie writes stuff on the board about some lab we’re about to start, droning on about this and that and how we’ll need partners.

Me: So, Angel. Want to be my partner?

Angel: Ha, ha. I sucked at physics.

Me: We can suck together. We can—wait...sucked?

“Want to be my partner?”

I know this voice is not Angel’s. Next to me, the blue-eyed girl from before leans closer, all that long dark hair around her face. She asks me, “Well, do you?”

This girl is brave. Her cheeks are seriously red, but her eyes are on me, hoping I’ll say “Yes,” and at the same time daring me to say “No.”

Someone—okay, not *someone*—this girl asking me to be her partner is totally not stealthy. The teacher assigning me a partner? That’s a big nothing. Saying “Yes” to blue eyes? That’s like choosing each other.

Me: What should I say, Angel?

Angel: What would I say?

Me: You’d say...

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

“Yeah...Okay, sure.”

Blue eyes smiles a little, and then looks back at her notebook really fast.

*Hey Boy,*

*Ever notice how time goes by*

*Fast*

*When you're having*

*Fun?*

*And*

*Slow when*

*You're*

*Not?*

Of course, “blue eyes” is not her name. It’s Caitlin. Lucky for me, Caitlin doesn’t suck at physics because we’ll be working on this lab for the next two weeks, and it’s going to count for a quarter of our grade.

I do everything Caitlin says and—bang—the class zips on by. The next thing I know, I’m back out in the hall, heading for Pre-Cal.

Something’s different.

Me: Hey, Angel...Where’d you go?

Angel: Nowhere.

Me: Well, why were you so quiet?

Angel: You were busy.

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

Me: No. I really wasn't.

Angel: Yeah. You really were.

*It's really hard*

*To let go.*

*I never thought about it*

*Before.*

*Now*

*That's all*

*I think of...*

*I think.*

*Except—*

*Tell me,*

*Is my now the same*

*As yours?*

“See, I told you Physics wasn't so bad.” That's what Mom says. We're having dinner, and somehow I'm telling her about the lab and about working with smart Caitlin.

Angel: You mean—smart, brave—

Me: Cut it out.

Angel: Ha! Make me.

I don't know what to say to that, so I don't say anything, which is good because Mom is talking. She's telling me about contracts and leases and how if she signs this stuff,

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

we’re committed to staying here for a good, long stretch. That’s how she says it—“a good, long stretch.”

I’m kind of nodding at her as if I understand what she’s talking about, but the thing is, I don’t. Sure, I get the words, but that’s all they are to me, because I don’t remember what it’s like to be somewhere long enough for any “good” or “stretching” to happen.

*This is what I remember...*

*Standing here*

*On a sunny day*

*With cardboard cut-outs and*

*Two cans of spray paint,*

*One*

*White*

*One*

*Black.*

*I had something to share, and I wish...*

*I wish I took*

*My own*

*Dare.*

*See?*

*Persuade.*

*One*

*Look*



“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

*One*

*Word*

*Can.*

The next day, I have Physics last, and when I get to class, I see her—Angel—in the back. She’s not facing me, but I’d know that short, short black hair anywhere. For a second I don’t know what to do. I’m a blender on high, all my bits whipping around. Crazy enough, as I walk toward the back row, my tiny, perfect Angel is still sitting on my shoulder, and it’s like I need to talk to her before I can, you know, talk to “her.”

Me: Angel?

Nothing.

Me again: Angel?

Angel in the back row turns and...

It’s Caitlin. She sees me, gives me her red-cheeked smile, her hand going to her all cut off hair.

“I cut my hair.” That’s what she says when I get to her.

“It was so heavy...I guess I got inspired,” as if I’d asked her why.

I must’ve said something, something that fit, because Caitlin smiles at me and opens her notebook.

I pull the backpack off my shoulders, and I get that invisible sting of all of a sudden knowing that my tiny, perfect Angel is not on my shoulder anymore. She’s gone.

*Gone...*

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

*It's a relative term.*

*How can I be*

*Gone,*

*If I was never*

*Really*

*Here?*

For the whole class, I'm sitting on pins and needles, waiting. The lab work runs late, but the second I am able to, I chuck my book and notebook into my pack, and am out of there before I've left the room. Caitlin says, “Wait up.” I should tell her, “Not today. Don't go my way today.” Her bright, wanting-to-walk-with-me face melts all those words away.

We walk out of the school together, and Caitlin asks me all the usual “get-to-know-you” stuff. I want to listen, but it's hard with this need to see Angel filling me up.

We get to the bike path and Caitlin starts to walk faster, saying she wants to show me something. I walk faster, too, half because I want to see Angel, and half because it's weird how not-weird it is that Caitlin's with me.

Afternoon sun gleams on the edge of Angel's paint. Caitlin gets to her first.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” She runs her fingers through her short, short hair as she looks down at Angel. “I guess you've probably already seen her...I mean, since you live this way, but...I don't know. I totally forgot she was here, and then I saw her again the other day, and—this is going to sound really nuts—but I thought of you for some reason.”

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

*Hey, Girl...*

*Two things before*

*I*

*Go.*

*One—*

*Some reason*

*Is as*

*Good a*

*Reason as*

*Any.*

*Two—*

*Share with the boy. I*

*Dare*

*You.*

*P.S.*

*Nice*

*Hair.*

“This girl was so cool,” says Caitlin, “She was this intense poet and she’d organize these poetry jams she called Persuades. Have you already heard about this? Her name was—”

“A Cut-Out Face”/Tipper

Whatever my expression is makes Caitlin go quiet. Without even meaning to, she’s told me Angel’s story is all about an ending. I look at Angel. I look at a cut-out face, paint on pavement, at the word that captured me from the start. “Persuade.”

Me: This is where we were going all along, right Angel?

She doesn’t answer, and I knew she wouldn’t.

Still...

I look at Caitlin, and this is what I say, “Will you tell me about her...later? I’d rather hear about you right now.”