

1000 Words

Kirby Mason took a long, loud sip of his tea. He barely tasted it as the warm beverage washed down his throat. He stared blankly into the cloudy liquid, but his eyes were focused on someplace far away. At the very edge of perception, he heard a tiny noise – scritch, scratch. He frowned instinctively.

“Mr. Mason, you say Jackie was an artist?” the homicide detective asked.

“What? Oh, yes,” Mason answered. “That other room over there was her studio.” He pointed vaguely across the living room, through an open door into the studio, where Jackie’s last painting stood propped up on its easel. The little studio was a barely ordered riot of tools, books, supplies and papers, with finished canvases slid carefully into wooden slots. The living room where Mason and the detective sat was no more tidy, as if the organized chaos of the studio had simply spilled out and taken over, the chief difference being the presence of more books, a couch, and intermittent barrages of knickknacks.

“Mind if I take a look?” the detective asked.

“Sure.” Mason absently waved his hand. He was trying to keep his foot from compulsively tapping. His nerves were on fire. Breathe, he thought. Just breathe.

He heard the odd little noise again – scritch, scratch. Mice.

The detective -- a tall, lanky man in his 30s who wore his rumpled business suit like it was combat fatigues – walked over to the door of the studio and flipped on the light switch. His trained eyes automatically took in details of the scene. The unfinished painting was all in shades of gray and still needed much work. The background was a mélange of trees, hills and buildings, a scene that was both rural and urban. The central figure was but a shadow, unfinished and indistinct – possibly a person, but it was unclear, unformed. It seemed to just be a space in the reality of the image, waiting for someone to come along and fill it.

“Unusual strokes,” he commented. “I’m no expert, but it seems to have an oriental feel.”

“You’re astute,” Mason said, raising his gaze from the tea he still held in his hand. “Jackie was a fan of Chinese art. She’s been – had been – researching Guan Daosheng and she took an interest in calligraphy.”

“Calligraphy?”

“In Chinese art, calligraphy used to be considered an essential skill,” Mason said, his breath catching. “I don’t get it myself, but the artist Guan said that the same strokes used in calligraphy were also the strokes that should be used in painting.”

“So she would practice writing letters to improve her paintings?”

Mason smiled weakly, looking at a vague spot on the floorboards.

Scritch, scratch.

“You know the saying, a picture’s worth a thousand words? She had this idea ... what if you could create a single word that was worth a thousand pictures, she would say. She tried to explain it to me. Something about ephemeral links between images and sounds, creating visual reality with words. It was all very doctoral thesis.”

“Sounds like you may have had trouble communicating.”

“What?” Mason visibly started, spilling some of his tea on the rug. He recovered quickly, though. “Um, well, she was very smart. Smarter than me.”

Scritch, scratch.

Must get some traps, Mason thought.

The detective looked around the apartment. “Jackie practiced calligraphy a lot?”

“Um, exercises, little experiments. Sometimes maybe she’d write a paragraph or a letter,” Mason muttered. His pulse was suddenly racing. Had he said something, some slip up, without realizing it? Did the detective suspect?

Scratch, scratch.

“All her calligraphy papers are over there, in that white box on the desk,” Mason volunteered, hoping his voice sounded even. “If you want to have a look?”

The detective acknowledged with a nod and opened the little wood box. He pulled out a small stack of little squares, each bearing a different, single word. Mason noticed the detective’s curious scowl. “Oh, those are just little notes Jackie would leave me,” he said, a slight smile crossing his face. “Practice, you know? Just one word whenever she’d go out or make me lunch or something. ‘Happy,’ ‘spacey,’ ‘yummy,’ whatever.”

“This one here says ‘horny.’”

“Uh, some were more personal than others. ...”

The detective grunted, replaced the notes and walked toward the apartment’s front door. “All right, Mr. Mason. Thank you for your time. I’ll contact the coroner about the final report and he’ll let you know when we can release the body. It should be fairly routine. Once again, I’m sorry for your loss.”

Mason shut the door behind him – not too quickly, he hoped. Then he leaned against the wall and let out a long breath, as if he’d just run a race. The apartment was silent now, except for the ticking of a clock somewhere in the mess.

Scratch, scratch.

The sound suddenly seemed louder than before. Irritated, Mason followed it toward the dim little studio, where Jackie’s painting sat, unfinished. Only now, why did the shadow in the middle seem to take the form of a figure, extending an accusing finger?

Mason slammed the door and retreated to the kitchen. He made himself another cup of tea and tried to calm his nerves, absorbing the blessed silence as he sipped.

Scratch, scratch.

Mason saw a flash of movement from the corner of his eye. He turned and saw, on the counter, a small square of paper beside a calligraphy pen. A forgotten note from Jackie? Mason carefully reached for the pen, as if it were a poisonous snake. The little blob of ink at the end glistened.

The phone rang, and Mason nearly jumped out of his skin. He took a deep breath and picked it up. "Hello, Mr. Mason? I'm calling from the coroner's office."

Mason cautiously picked up the paper and slowly flipped it over.

The coroner spoke in his ear. "It's about your wife's body."

There was a single word written on the note:

"Missing."