

The First Chapters Writing Contest

Lunatic Saint by Jennifer Meade

(Winning Entry from 2020)



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Cas, an insomniac prophet, dreams of his best friend committing an impossible murder. A normal night. Until the victim joins their underground mafia to spy for his boss. And he falls in love with her.

Chapter One: Caspar

In a city too tired for miracles, three persisted. Two boys with magic in their veins and a third with no need for it. Brothers, all, made so by a baptismal service at midnight. Age ten, Eivan still in his school uniform, James in flannel pajamas, and Caspar, stifling a screech as the cold water of the baptism tub soaked his superhero underwear. Blood made James faint, so Eivan had scraped a red permanent marker across each raised palm instead of a knife.

Caspar had curled into a bony-limbed lump at the bottom of James's bed that night. James was reading *The Princess Bride* out loud, his speech slurred with yawning. He fell asleep before Cas, the book slipping onto his chest, a red smear of wet ink on its back cover. James was a beautiful sleeper, alive with snores and face-first pillow hugs. His room was warm, his bed piled high with blankets and sweatshirts worn once. Cas pulled the book from his hands, lay his head down on the open page, and dreamed.

Seven years and five dreams later it was not night any longer, and Cas had forgotten how to sleep.

He drew his limbs back into himself, curling against a hardwood floor. Cas lay alone in the middle of a hundred faces, every single one of them unfinished, given life only to the point where if he drew one more line it would either be finished or ruined. Cas didn't like these types of decisions, so he found another person to watch, to capture the hitch of their frown but leave their jaw gaping and empty.

Noontime heat slithered through the open window of his attic room, dragging with it the scents of hot asphalt, cheap burgers, and diesel fuel. Cas was hungry, the type

of hungry that tainted your mouth with stomach acid after too many hours of staring and too few of sleep. He waited for a drop of sweat to find its way down his eyebrow. The ceiling fan clung motionless to his ceiling. Century-old dark wood paneling sloped down from the fan's perch like the steep line of Eivan's nose.

Eivan, the oldest of the brothers, lived in a room at the end of the hallway, a maze of packing boxes and wardrobes drenched in color by the church's stained glass crucifix. Only the room's center was clear, making space for Eivan's idol, a red leather punching bag hung from the rafters by a heavy iron chain. The few times Cas slept willingly it was to the sound of Eivan's fists pounding leather like hellish rain. But Eivan was working downstairs, working, working, working and Cas was far too tired to sleep.

Caspar reached behind him, tugging at the sheet on his metal-frame bed. It fought, clinging to its purpose even though most nights the bed was nothing more than a holder for ignored textbooks. Cas preferred the floor, or the roof just outside his window. At night the city hummed quietly to itself, a gentle buzz that echoed the sound of Cas's blood pounding against his temples. Now, his head pressed to the floor and his arm twisted high, wrapping the sheet around his forearm in a slow battle for control, Cas heard voices from the floor below instead, a gagged buzzing punctuated with sharp bursts.

A prophet's dreams do not come easily, whether he is ten or sixteen. A gift, they said--a gift of insomniac eyes and stinging skin for the boy who dreamed of death. The sheet jerked in defeat then fell softly against Cas's skin, stilling the papers, the breeze, and the sounds of the open window until life narrowed to the press of the floor against his bones and the sound of his friends below.

Cas tugged at a pencil buried in the pocket of the yellow plaid pajama pants he stole from James. The girl in this dream had a face he didn't know, hadn't touched. He would draw her; he would finish her; she would die. A sketch near his jaw captured the harsh lines of a man's shoulders, tucked tight against a sudden storm. He flipped the sketch, his eyes unfocused as he ran his pencil lightly over the blank back.

He chose the line of her jaw first, using one of the dark slashes bleeding through from the front to anchor its shape. The line slumped where it should not, tugging her chin to a point instead of a curve. He pushed dark curls out of his eyes, shaking his head to force his attention out of the dream.

His breath made the air stale under the blanket. Her hair was blonde, cropped short and ragged. The sheet brushed against his cheek over and over as he pushed out the strokes, framing her face with chaos. Static electricity crackled, tickling his

skin. The sheet caught at the end of his pencil, fighting against the line of her lips. They pulled tight around teeth biting off the end of her shout, any curves lost to desperation. She stared at him with blank white ovals for eyes. Cas circled in an iris, the barest hint of gray.

He stopped. A drop of sweat smudged the line of her nose. She watched him, caught in a scream. He dug the pencil into the whirl of her iris, scraping over and over and over. His fingers shook. The paper tore; the lead snapped off against the floor. Her face shredded from the eyes out, furious strokes carving gashes in the worn wood of his floor.

The door swung open. Footfalls beat the floor. The sheet twitched, tugged upward, her ruined face dancing in the sudden draft.

Eivan twisted down to look at Cas, the harsh lines of his face were marred on one side only, by choice and not artistry. A bruise the size of a man's fist circled freshly scabbed cuts from last night's practice spar. His eyes were the same dark grey as the graphite irises Cas had just destroyed.

In the dream, her eyes were a bright four-leaf-clover green. But Cas had no colored pencils, and no desire to give a tint of life to her.

Cas crumpled her torn face inside his fist as Eivan's eyes drifted from his down toward the sketch. For a moment, the two boys were silent. Then Eivan picked up the ruined pencil, snapping it in half. He held a hand out. Cas took it, letting someone else bear his weight.

"Who?" Eivan said, touching the ruined paper through Cas's fist.

The sheet clung to Cas's shoulders, a polyester blend prophet's mantle. His hair slipped forward to shade his eyes, sticking in the sweat lacing his temples. Cas let the paper fall to the floor. Eivan wore a dress shirt and a frown, both blinding in the hot afternoon sun.

Cas bent to swipe his sweatshirt off the ground, sheet sloughing off. He picked at the bleach spots marring the Nirvana on his hoodie and leaned into Eivan's shoulder, watching Eivan's pulse press against the skin above his collar. A-live a-live a-live. Cas laid two fingers on his wrist, pulse thumping in time with Eivan's beneath the scars. He traced each of the four Xs branding his skin, none made with permanent marker. "I don't know," he said.

Cas forced a grin. His hand fell to his side. He whispered, shoving off Eivan's shoulder. "But you're the one who kills her."