

## SEIZE THE NIGHT

By Brian Farrey-Latz

He'd come all this way. He'd gotten up at 3:00am to start the two-and-a-half hour drive from San Diego to LA. He'd packed all his acrylics, his best brushes, a plastic bag full of paint-spattered towels, and three Mason jars filled with thinner. He'd scarfed down a half-frozen breakfast burrito, not nuked quite long enough, and a Darth Vader travel mug filled with cinnamon spice tea that he'd maybe nuked too long. He'd navigated on instinct alone, vague memories of his one-and-only visit to Runyon Canyon providing questionable—and occasionally inaccurate—directions. GPS be praised, he arrived at *the spot* in the canyon with half an hour to spare. When the time came, he'd be ready to paint.

Only he'd forgotten to pack something to paint *on*.

Evan sat in the collapsible lawn chair he'd pointed east to watch the sun rise over the mountains. He'd spent the last twenty minutes watching a pie wedge of black horizon nestled between two peaks. It grudgingly turned purple, then deep blue, as dawn bullied its way into view. In that time, he'd sung two dozen songs softly to himself, replacing each syllable of each lyric with the word 'fuck.' He hadn't quite forgiven himself for coming without something to paint on.

Every so often, he looked over at his hatchback. The grimy back window practically sang his name. *Paint on me*, it said. He was tempted. Damn, was he tempted. To come all this way and then go home with nothing to show for it was going to suck. It already sucked. But he was good. He didn't paint his back window.

*Evan, I'm taking the fellowship in Paris.*

As far as break-ups go, it could have been worse. Not that he had a lot of experience with break-ups. In all his twenty-one years, this was his first. But he'd heard horror stories. Break-ups via text. Break-ups via e-mail. Break-ups via ignoring all contact for weeks on end. At least Erik had done it face to face. Evan appreciated that. He also wanted to rip Erik's face off. Infuriatingly considerate to the very end.

*I'll never get another chance like this. I'll be doing research with some of the top scientists in their field. They were pioneers during the AIDS crisis in the 80s. How could I say no?*

He'd argued with Erik. He'd pointed out that they'd made long distance work once before. They could make it work again. He'd said it—*insisted* it—but hadn't believed it. And Erik had seen through him.

*Let's be honest. Neither of us has been very happy lately. Right?*

Right. Yes, he was right. Why did he have to be right? When had they both stopped being happy? Who had stopped first? Evan had. He knew he had. He hated knowing that. He could picture that *exact* moment when he realized the relationship wasn't working the way it used to. Or the way he thought it always would.

That moment here, in this spot, nearly six months ago. A hike in Runyon Canyon meant to blow off steam after a tense week spent squabbling about money or schedules or pick any of the arguments that had crept insidiously into their lives over the past year. An impromptu road trip—impromptu road trips were their thing—a romantic getaway weekend to heal all that and bring them closer. But Evan—stupid, overthinking Evan—had chosen to have an epiphany instead.

The hike had gone as planned. He hadn't said anything about what he'd realized. He hadn't needed to. He was sure that his every glance, his every kiss, his every breath for the last six months had telegraphed his newfound knowledge: *I don't feel the way I used to.*

If Erik had noticed right away, he hadn't let on. He still woke every day with a goofy grin on his face. He still charged forward with the same giddy, contagious optimism. That only accelerated the descent. The happier Erik got, the faster Evan had pulled away. He'd forced himself to. There was, he'd known, a certain amount of cowardice in this. He had no exit strategy. Because he knew he wouldn't need one. Erik, as always, had come through and given them both an out.

*Please don't hate me, Evan. I have to do this. You know me. Carpe diem and all that.*

He was never going to hate Erik. Three years sharing the same bed, leaning on each other during the rough times, celebrating their joint successes. Falling out of love, he'd learned, didn't mean that closeness vanished. Even if he'd wanted it to. This would be much easier if the absence of love meant the installation of hate. Easier, sure, but not desired. And Erik had been determined to make the break-up as simple as possible for Evan.

This jackass with his unconditional support. Who the hell did he think he was? Who could possibly hate that?

And *that's* what Evan hated. Not the fact that it was over. The idea that, once all the cards were on the table, they both knew Evan would have trouble moving on. That he would need to be coddled into single life, taken by the hand and walked step by step into what lie beyond. They both knew he was useless.

Evan jumped up from the chair. The early morning chill slithered across his skin. He shook his arms and legs, jogged in place. All the while, he kept his eyes focused on *the spot.*

*I need this*, he thought. *I need to paint this*. It was the only evidence that he had been paying attention to life. He hadn't just been coasting, going through the motions of his relationship. He'd come to a *very difficult conclusion* about how his love life had imploded and he should get credit for that. He should have something to show for it.

Which, of course, made him feel only more childish and lost. But maybe he should let himself have that. A final hurrah, a memorial service for his insecurities before he became totally self-sufficient and charged forward the way he was expected to: bitter and blaming Erik for everything.

Only it wasn't Erik's fault.

*That's what all victims say*, Evan's friend Lori had said. But Lori liked her drama and created it from a vacuum when life got boring. She'd said this, thinking it was what Evan wanted to hear. She'd believed he would move on if he'd see himself as powerless and gullible. Few things were certain to Evan. But he knew he *wasn't* a victim.

And it *hadn't* been Erik's fault. He'd never demanded Evan follow him around. He'd never insisted Evan give up any dreams so Erik could pursue his own. Erik wasn't some cult leader who'd demanded total surrender, the banishment of autonomy. Evan had done it all on his own. A noob's version of true love: sacrifice, unrequired and unrequited.

He knew that when he got back to San Diego this evening, they'd finish dividing up their stuff. They'd finish packing and cleaning. Tomorrow, Erik would help Evan move into his new apartment. Then they'd say their goodbyes, and Evan, act two, would continue.

He had no idea how to do that.

It sounded pathetic. *Pathetic*. He was fully grown. An adult. A fully grown, intelligent adult. Yet the idea of life on his own was foreign, alien, and terrifying. He'd never defined himself by their relationship but its absence felt like flying blind.

Yet, Erik knew how to do it. He'd always known, damn him. As much as Erik craved a relationship, he was annoyingly capable of getting by without one. That was Erik. He had the answer for everything. Even when he didn't, he faked it and it always worked out for him. Always.

Damn him.

*Carpe diem and all that*. That was Erik. Minute to minute, day to day. He wasn't afraid of anything. He'd spent his life seizing every day he could. It came so naturally.

Damn him.

He'd often thought that was what had first drawn him to Erik. That boundless energy, that "every day is a gift" attitude that prevailed when whole worlds collapsed around him. Around them. There was a time Evan had drawn on that strength. There was a time he'd have given anything to approach life that way.

"Why are we always seizing days?" he'd asked Erik once in a gentle challenge. It was...what, eight months ago? They were camping near the Redwood Forest. Their dying campfire had forced them to snuggle and Erik had been trying to convince Evan he should do something or other. He had, as always, told Evan to *carpe diem*.

"Why don't we seize nights?" Evan had asked, laying his head on Erik's shoulder. It was a clever tactic designed to distract Erik from convincing him of anything. It only sometimes worked.

“Seizing days are easier. Light makes everything clear.” It was a bullshit answer, a poetic response to Evan’s painfully literal question. But then Erik got quiet, a silence Evan knew heralded vulnerability. “Now you know my dirty secret. I *carpe diem* because I’m afraid to seize nights. Too many unknowns. Only the truly great can do that.”

Back then, Evan had firmly believed Erik could seize anything he wanted. Even today, with the break-up and all, he wanted to believe it. But the sincerity of Erik’s conviction as he declared himself not brave enough to seize nights had put a crack in the glass that Evan couldn’t see anymore. Part of him enjoyed knowing that Erik had Kryptonite after all. Why had it taken this long to spot?

In all their time together, as closely as he’d watched Erik, studying his every nuance, somehow in all that, Evan hadn’t learned how to seize anything. He felt stupid. Helpless. Impotent. How hard could it be?

Hard.

The first stab of sunlight pierced his retinas, filling Evan’s vision with hot flaming death. He’d waited for it. Knew it was coming. Had plenty of time to avert his gaze. Still, his head jerked back and he held his hand up between his eyes and the horizon. He deserved the temporary blindness, he was sure.

His hands itched. He clenched and unclenched his fists, the restlessness that had invaded his body since learning he had no canvas finally taking over. He was going to do *something*, dammit. He was going to prove he could move on. He would do it the only way he knew how.

He would paint his troubles away.

He hooked his thumb through the hole in his kidney-shaped palette. A lifetime of dried paint covered its surface, creating an inadvertent mosaic of muted colors. Overlapping ghosts of everything he'd ever painted. They all haunted him. Right here. Right now.

*Fuck carpe diem.*

He held a full, newly-opened tube of black paint over his palette and squeezed with his whole hand, crushing the tube in his fist. The paint burst out, forming an angry turd. He took his widest brush and plunged it into the fresh paint, twisting the brush so the paint gathered like cotton candy weaving a beehive around a paper cone. Hatred over everything he was and would ever be churned in his chest.

*You're gonna do great, Evan. I have no doubt in my mind. You're so talented—*

Talented. Not confident. Not capable. He was supposed to do something with his “talent.” Something that showed he had a game plan.

All he had was this. This place. A memory of that moment when he'd summoned the courage to admit to himself that things weren't going to last. That had to mean something. Because if it didn't, he was walking away from a three year relationship with nothing to call his own. *This* belonged to him. He'd come to claim it as he had the few other things he could call his own. By painting it. And now he couldn't even do that.

When had he ever forgotten a canvas before? Maybe he'd done it on purpose. Maybe some weird, unconscious boogiemer kept him from packing something to paint on because it knew that once he did, it was all over. The relationship, the last three years, and any pretense that he knew what to do next.

With a primal howl, Evan attacked the air with his brush, slashing it up and over in an arc. He expected the big glob of paint to fly off into smaller globs and dot the dusty canyon floor

like little reverse stars. If he couldn't make a painting, then he'd Jackson Pollack the shit out of the canyon.

But instead, the jagged slash of black paint hung in the air, an angry, mocking smile on an invisible canvas. Evan stared at it. The paint didn't run, it didn't float like liquid in zero gee. It just sat there as if he'd actually made a brush stroke.

He walked around it. He touched it. Still moist.

He raised his brush and swiped another playful stroke just below the first. It, too, left a streak of paint. His eyes narrowed. When he focused on the paint, suspended in mid air, he noticed he couldn't see past it. The opaque line blocked his view of the landscape beyond. He quickly swiped two more strokes into the air. Each one had the same effect.

*This is what I know to do. How could I forget?*

Breathlessly, he scooped up more paint and continued to daub at this, his new creation. Stroke by stroke, the mountains in the distance vanished behind a crosshatch pattern of black. *Swipe*—a tree disappeared. *Swipe*—the hillside gave way.

Evan laughed. It started as a single, low grunt. Then it dominoed into something worthy of a supervillain about to succeed in his diabolical plan. He laughed as he swung the brush back and forth, like a swordsman with a grudge against the open air. Every move left its mark, building a wall of paint between Evan and the distant sunrise he sought to replace.

He pushed a quarter-sized pool of black paint with his thumb until it sat on its own in a small patch nearby. He added a dab of white and churned the two together until a deep gray formed. He rolled the bristles of the brush around in his new color, turned, and flicked the brush upward with his arm outstretched. The new gray streak bisected that first black grin. He added accents and highlights, turning the wild wall of black into nightscape.



Standing in place, Evan turned round and round, scarring the air with broad strokes. The world disappeared behind an acrylic landscape. Los Angeles, hazy in the distance, vanished behind black swirls. He painted all the way to the ground. He stood on his tip toes and painted above his head, creating a dome of black and gray. He painted and painted and painted until the offending light of day was completely blocked.

By the glow of his phone, Evan dipped a fine point brush into a tube of white paint. He dotted his artificial night sky with artificial white stars and he swore he saw them artificially twinkle.

Runyon Canyon was gone. The day that had just begun—and was no doubt already being seized by Erik elsewhere—had retreated. Everywhere Evan looked, the night—*his* night—surrounded him.

This was what he did. This was what he had always done. It was how he saw the world. He didn't re-create reality when he painted. He replaced it.

This was just the start.

Evan lowered himself to the ground and sat cross-legged. He smiled up at his new creation. It wasn't perfect. It wasn't a plan. But it *was* what came next.

*Carpe noctem.*