

Abandonment

by Sean Carman

"Your first piece, Abandonment," the reporter from *Artbeat* said, "can you tell us how that idea came to you?"

The young woman's pen stood straight up, like a lone soldier on a battlefield, Claire thought. And those eyes: so trusting. She wanted to tell her the truth. That she'd merely gathered some empty cups from the other tables, and piled them up into a tower, adding a few creamer containers and swizzle sticks for decorative effect. Then she'd left it all, along with her copy of *The New Yorker*, to fetch some cinnamon for her latte. When she returned, a forty-ish man in a cream jacket was raving at the mess she'd made.

"Oh, this," he said to her, "I love this. I absolutely love what you've done."

Claire studied the open magazine and the piled-high cups -- which did resemble a coffee-cup Tower of Babel, now that she thought about it -- and wondered what she had done.

"What you've got here is incredible," the man went on. "Just incredible."

Claire was an open person, honest to a fault. She'd only told a serious lie once, in seventh grade, and the experience had been so traumatic she'd never lied with any real consequence again. So she was surprised, and even slightly exhilarated, when a counter-intuitive idea flew into her head and, against her instincts, she caught its tail.

"Thank you!" she said. "I'm glad you like it!"

"Jorge Sachs," the man in the cream jacket said, fishing a card out of his inside pocket. Of the gallery on Avenue B, surely she had heard? Claire nodded: Of course. The current show was wrapping up, and he hadn't seen anything he loved. But this, he said. Could she bring a few things by, say Tuesday? He said some other things, enough for Claire to get an idea of what was going on.

"Of course it won't have the same impact in the gallery," he told her, "Work like this never does." He touched her elbow and leaned in, but kept his eyes on the empty table.

"It was so smart to do this as a performance piece," he whispered. "Just brilliant."

Claire enlisted her friend Julie with the promise of a bottle of chardonnay, and they agreed on Saturday. It was easy, actually. The ideas just came to them. *Nothing On* consisted of a television on a small stand, playing an endless loop of *Jersey Shore*. *Shopping Bores Me* was a men's flannel shirt from American Apparel on an otherwise empty rack. *John Updike Lied to Me*, their best idea, was a battered copy of *Rabbit, Run* lying open and unfinished on a bedroom table.

"Well, here's where I'm exposed as a fraud," Claire said cheerfully, as she and Julie carried the items into Jorge's gallery. But he loved her work. Loved it. He gestured. He gushed. He told stories from his last trip to Venice. "You must see Venice," he told Claire. "Promise me you will." He also fixed outrageous prices to her work, and promised her a 50-percent commission.

And in this way, everything had slowly gotten out of hand. So she wanted to confess to the reporter, she really did. But she also knew that now was not the time. The opening was going so well, a respectable crowd of beautiful people chatting so enthusiastically, and Jorge had been so supportive and kind. And there was Julie, in the corner of her eye, talking to a tall man Claire had overheard say something about a hedge fund.

And so she smiled to the reporter, and said the words that already struck her as routine.

"I was just thinking about the disaffection of my generation," she began, "and the idea of ennui..."

