

ANATOMY OF FEAR

an illustrated novel

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“People are more practiced in lying with words than with their faces.”

Paul Ekman, UNMASKING THE FACE

PROLOGUE

This is the way he always sees it.

The man, stretched out on the concrete, blood pouring out of his head seeping into the grooves of that define the sidewalk. From somewhere beneath the body more blood is being pumped, an amoeba-shaped pond spreading beyond the torso.

He has heard detectives describe the crime scene and years later stole the case report to read what a Medical Examiner had written. He knows the details: one shot in the head, two in the chest. He also knows that the shot in the head came later, as the man lay bleeding though still alive, because the medical examiner has noted two things: one, that the heart had bled out, indicating the body was still pumping blood before it shut down; and two, that there were powder burns on the man's temple, a clear indication that the assailant fired that last bullet at close range.

This is the way he sees it, often upon awakening, constantly there as he falls asleep, though more often it has kept him awake.

It has become his bedtime story and his waking nightmare for almost twenty years. It is like an artificial limb which, over time, he has learned to detach long enough so he can eat and dress, have conversations, make love and, even laugh. These are the moments when he forgets, but such moments are few. It is not easy to forget that you killed your father.

The cop led the girl into a seat. “This is Laurie McGrath,” she said.

I took her in, then looked away, no more than a few seconds to register the shape of her face (oval), color of her hair (dark blond), young (no more than twenty), left eye swollen half shut, bruise the size of a perfect silver dollar on the zygomatic arch of her cheek, full lips, bottom one split and sutured.

I cleared my throat to get her attention, but did not touch her. I knew better. “Hi, Laurie. I’m Nate Rodriguez,” I made sure to keep my voice soft and added a smile, though the girl did not return it. “You up to this?”

“Sure she is,” said the cop, dyed red hair pulled back from a thin face, rough skin under heavy pancake makeup, ID pinned to her blouse, SCHMID.

Laurie cadged a look at me through her good eye, possibly assessing my features—dark eyes, dark hair, long bumpy nose a mix of genetics and teenage brawls. I usually say I got the nose from my mother, Judith Epstein, formerly of Forest Hills, New York, the hair, eyes, and attitude from my father, Juan Rodriguez, NYPD Narcotics, by way of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

“Laurie is pretty sure her assailant was Latino,” said Schmid, looking away, embarrassed, as if she’d said something she shouldn’t, as if I didn’t know I was half Spanish. She leaned a hand on the young woman’s shoulder, and I saw her flinch.

How many days had it been? I replayed the case report in my mind—*pulled into an alleyway, raped at knife-point, beaten*—but couldn’t remember. I’ve never been good at dates, so I looked at the girl to figure out the timing. Her bruises were fresh. It could not have been more a day or two. You get to know these things when you’ve been making forensic sketches as long as I have.

“If it’s okay with you, Laurie, I’m going to ask Detective Schmid to leave us alone for a few minutes.” I hadn’t worked with Schmid before or she’d have known I needed to be alone with the victim.

The young woman’s shoulders tensed, but she nodded.

I waited until the detective left, then offered Laurie a smile, a less expansive version of what my *abuela* calls *mi sonrisa matadora*. “So, you in school?”

“Cosmetology,” she said after a moment. “You know, beauty school.”

“Hair or make-up?”

“Both,” she said, taking a deep breath. “But I like doing make-up better.”

“Must be fun,” I said, thinking it was something, she was used to looking at faces and evaluating them. I asked a few more questions—the kind of cosmetics she liked to use, how long the program was, her plans—anything to keep her talking. After a while she seemed to relax a bit, glancing up at me from time to time, her facial muscles going through a series of micro-expressions—suspicion, fear, sadness—that the great psychologist-scientist, Paul Ekman, has dissected and codified in his *Facial Coding System*.

I’ve been obsessed with Ekman since he came and spoke to my Quantico class seven years ago and have memorized his forty-three “action-units,” the basic muscle movements the face can make that combine to create over ten-thousand possible expressions. There’s no way anyone can learn or identify them all, but I’m working on it.

“So, that true, what Detective Schmid said, you think the guy was Spanish?” I asked.

“I think so. His skin wasn’t dark, but...”

“Like my coloring?”

Laurie glanced up at me, then quickly away. “Oh, no. He was much darker.”

She said this as if she was giving me a compliment. I've gotten pretty used to that. Fact is, I have been aware of skin-tone racism most of my life, in particular among the people for whom it most matters, African Americans and New York Hispanics. I can't tell you how many times, after hearing my last name, a dark-skinned Latin will tell me I could pass for white, always with a little desire and resentment. If you ask me it's totally fucked. But then, I pass for white, right, so what do I know?

"Sometimes it helps if you close your eyes," I said. "It's easier to visualize that way."

"I can't. When I do he's... all I see."

"You know, Laurie, that's the best news I've heard all day, because if you can see him, you can describe him." I massaged my two-day growth of stubble, sat back, and let that sink in. "You think you can do that, close your eyes and try to let it in just for a minute?"

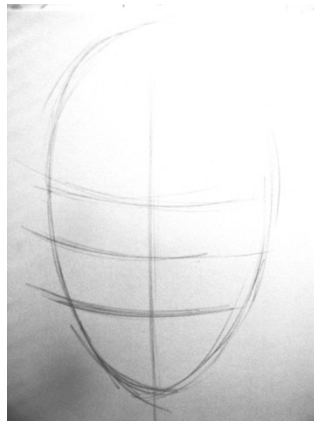
She nodded, her bad eye closing, the other flickering a few times before it shut. When it did, she sucked in a quick breath, almost a gasp.

"You see him," I said, and knew she had. "I know this is difficult, but hold onto him. Think of this: you've got him now." I paused to give her a minute, let my fingers flit over the surface of my high-end drawing paper, Arches, hot press which I cut down to eleven-by-fourteen inches so it fits easily inside a case file, heavyweight so I can erase without tearing it, and one-hundred percent rag, which makes it archival. I like the idea that my sketches will last and I'm superstitious enough to believe if I use good materials the drawings might turn out better. I gripped my Ebony pencil in one hand, a gray blob of kneaded eraser in the other.

"So, let's start with something simple, okay? The shape of his face. Try to see it like a geometric shape, round, square—"

"Oval," she said squeezing her eyes shut, "With a pointy chin."

“Fantastic,” I said, my pencil already moving on the paper, anatomical names—*mandible, maxilla, lacrimal*—automatically clicking off in my mind, words I’d learned in anatomy class that I might use with an M.E. but never with a subject. I started, as I always do, with a general template, a sort of guide for myself.



It wasn't anything, but I knew there was an image there, waiting. I think of a sketch the way Michelangelo thought about a slab of marble—that the figure was inside and he just had to chip away at the rock to release it. I'm no Michelangelo, but I try to keep that concept in my head while I'm drawing, and without the tricks. I've tried them all—Smith & Wesson's Identikit, PHOTO-FIT, MEMOPIX, even the hot new computer program, FACES—but they're not for me. To my mind, moving stock features around on a computer screen leaves something out. Soul, maybe. I don't know. But I get something from scratching a pencil on paper that works for me.

At Quantico, I studied all the greats in the field of forensic art, memorized the guidelines in the Composite Art Manual, and that, coupled with psychology courses and Ekman's theories have made me pretty good at reading faces and creating them.

Laurie had her eyes tightly shut, obviously concentrating on the face in her mind.

I needed her to describe it and have learned it's better to come at it obliquely rather than asking a direct question.

“So what kinds of makeup do you use in class?”

“Oh, all kinds, Almay, because it's hypo-allergenic, MAC, Great Lash by Mabelline is the old standby mascara, but I like Lancome's Hynose, even though it's really expensive.”

I zeroed in on the mascara, moved her to eyeliner, then to her attacker's eyes.

“They were in shadow, but... I think it was that he had a heavy brow, you know what I mean, like it came to a V.”

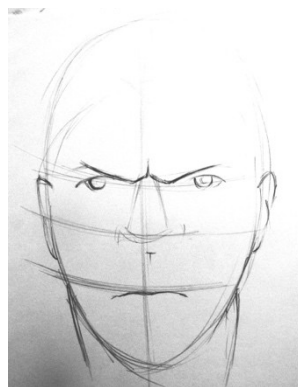
“His eyebrows, you mean? Like a unibrow?”

“More like his brow was just... thick and heavy. This is going to sound stupid, but—”

“Nothing is stupid.”

“Well, you know the way Leo, Leonardo di Caprio, the way his brow comes to a V above his nose?”

I pictured the young movie idol, could see his face, and quickly got that aspect of it down on paper.



“That's great,” I said.

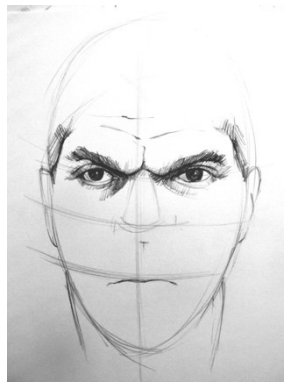
I'd always been able to draw. When I was in Junior High I designed personalized tattoos for all my friends, one for myself too, which I glanced at it now, regretting I'd ever done it. For

weeks after, I'd worn long-sleeved shirts though it was a hot New York summer and I was sweltering. I was trying to hide it from my mother though she eventually saw it and threw a fit. *Didn't I know that tattooing was against our religion?* I asked her if I'd missed something, like when she got to be so Jewish?

“So, anything else about Di Caprio's forehead?”

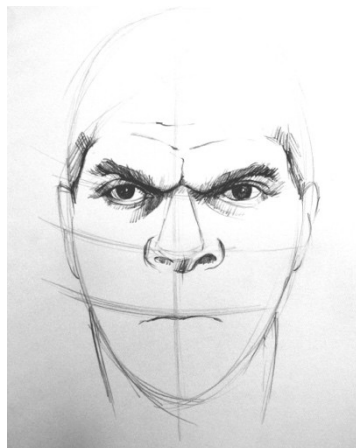
“Just the V, only cruder, and a lot meaner.”

I sketched in the heavy brow and dark eyes that she was describing.



I asked Laurie to move down his face, to his nose, and got her to describe it.

“Thick,” she said. “Wide... and the nostrils were—what's the word?—flaring?” She added a few details about the nose and eyes, then came back to the brow and the V, and soon her words slipped inside my head like strokes of paint, and I was really starting to see him too.



Laurie's eyes suddenly flipped open. "I'm not sure I—I keep thinking... why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

"You didn't do anything." I tried to sound convincing though part of me was thinking, well, maybe you or your mother or your brother or your ancestors pissed off *Iku*, or someone hadn't made the correct offering to *Chango*, which annoyed the hell out of me because I could not believe how this stuff was engrained in me.

"I, I don't think I can do this."

"Listen to me, Laurie." I tried to hold her in my gaze. "You can do this. I know you can. This guy is scum, an animal, and we don't want him to hurt anyone else, right? You can do this."

There were tears running down her cheeks, so I took a gamble, reached out and touched her hand. She flinched, than tightened her grip.

I let her hold onto my hand but after a minute said, "I'm going to need that hand back."

Laurie almost smiled, let go, and closed her eyes again.

"Any scars?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so." She opened her eyes, and the tears started again.

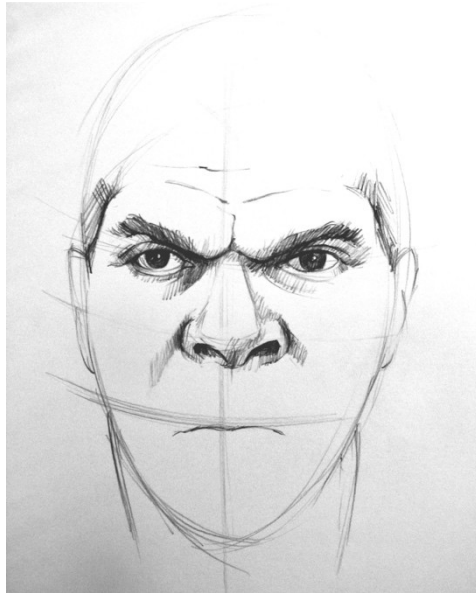
"Stay with me, Laurie. Think of it this way. You conjure his image and give it to me. I record it on paper, and you can forget it. He's gone, erased. It's a shamanistic sort of thing. You know what I'm saying?"

"Like you're a witch doctor?"

I had to smile at the label, something I'd heard tossed around incorrectly most of my life. "Yeah, I guess. Sort of."

Laurie closed her eyes and I closed mine, and for a moment I thought I could see the face in her mind. From time to time it happened, an inexplicable transference.

When I opened my eyes I went back to work.



Now Laurie started talking, really getting into it, emphasizing the pointy chin, the flared nose, and something new, full lips, “Thick and pouty,” she said.

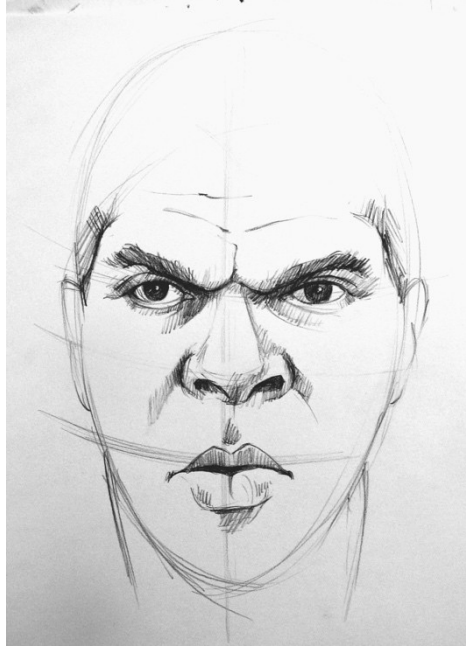
“That’s great. How old would you say?”

“Thirty? Maybe a little older.”

She continued to talk and I kept drawing. Twenty or thirty minutes passed.

“I’m going to need you to look at this.”

I waited a second before I turned it around.



That sound again, air sucked into her lungs, a stifled gasp.

I didn't say anything, just waited, chewing on the back end of my pencil, a bad habit I couldn't kick.

"It looks like him, but... the chin is wrong."

Defense attorneys often argue that you cannot depend on a victim or eyewitness for identification, but plenty of people have damn good visual memories. Over the years I'd made hundreds of sketches from witnesses and victims, and more than half of them have resulted in an arrest and conviction so I beg to differ with the suits.

Laurie was staring at the drawing and I saw something change in her eyes, a bit of excitement now mixing in with the dread, something I'd seen lots of times.

"There's something else," she said. "Something missing, but I don't know what."

“Hold on a sec.” I reached for my stack of cards: images I had collected over the seven years that I’d been doing this job, from newspapers, books, and paintings, cut out and laminated, all sorts of faces, all races, mostly men. I sorted through them, selected a group, and spread them onto the table. “Anything in these?”

Laurie ran her tongue over her sore lip and shook her head.

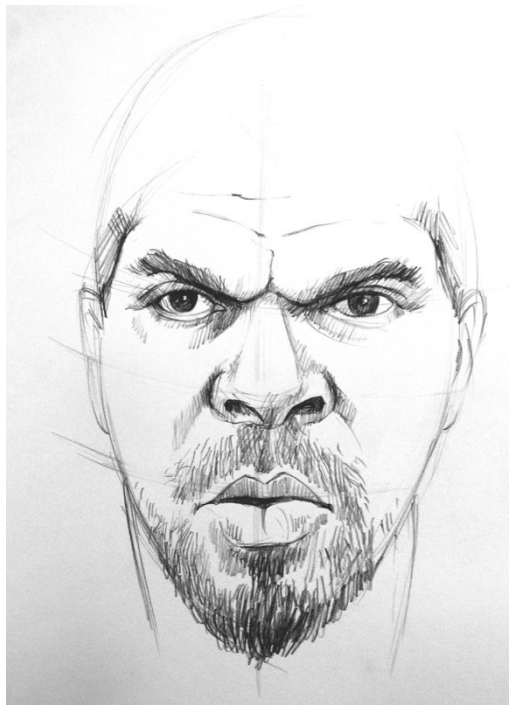
I tried another group. “What about these?”

“No, but... wait. That’s it! His chin! It wasn’t that it was pointy. It was that he had a, you know, a goatee, like that guy there, in that picture.”

I quickly sketched it in. “What about a mustache?”

“Yes. No. More like he hadn’t shaved in a while.” She looked up and glanced at my cheeks. “Like you, stubble, you know, only it was fuller on his chin, like I said, and pointy.”

I reworked the drawing for a minute then turned it back for her to see.



Laurie sucked in a startled gasp.

“It’s like him?”

“Yes,” she said. “But wait— He was wearing a hat!”

“What kind? A cap or—”

“Yes, a cap, a woolen one.”

We were really into it now, our minds connecting.

“It was... rough. It rubbed against—” She shook her head back and forth as if trying to physically dislodge the memory.

“Stay with me, Laurie.”

“Yes,” she said, “Yes. The hat—it was one of those knit caps, you know, that you just pull on. It covered the top of his head, and—” Her eyes were tight slits of concentration. “It just covered the tops of his ears.”

I sketched it in and turned it around.



“Jesus,” she whispered, blinking, as if she wanted to look and not look at the same time.

“It’s... him.”

“Is there anything else you can remember about his face, anything that I should change?”

She shook her head no, holding her breath.

I touched her hand again. “He’s on paper now, remember? Not in your head.”

She looked at me, good eye narrowed to match the bruised one. “He’ll always be in my head.”

“Try closing your eyes.”

“What’s the point?”

“Maybe he won’t be there.”

I could see she was scared to try.

“C’mon,” I said, without pushing too hard.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “I still see him.”

“But he’s fading, right?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe he is.”

“And soon he’ll be gone.” I hoped my face was not betraying the lie. No way he’d ever leave her. Certain pictures remain etched on the brain. I knew that to be a fact, but I didn’t say it. I told her she’d done a great job, that she’d be okay.

When she left I stayed behind, got lost in the drawing for a while, added shading, blending areas with soft cardboard stumps or my fingertips, attempting to give the face more dimension and life, then I sat back and assessed it.



It wasn't bad, not exactly art with a capital A. Not science either. It was sort of like me: not quite a cop, not quite an artist, more like I was swimming around the periphery of each.

I took the sketch into a hallway, sprayed it with fixative so it wouldn't smudge, and dropped it onto Detective Schmid's desk.

Afterward, I stopped into the men's room, washed the graphite off my hands, splashed my face with cold water and felt a chill. It was one of those bad feelings you can't explain until the bad thing happens and then you think: *Was that it?*