

## Four Pencil Sketches

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# Four Pencil Sketches

by [3pipeproblem](#)

Summary

"The essence of drawing is the line exploring space."

*"There was a pistol wrapped in oilskin, so that its smell was released when she uncovered it. Toothbrush and tooth powder, pencil sketches in a notebook..."*

#### i. light

He possesses the artist's innate sense of his tools but will never fully comprehend the potential bound up in them. The first time he wraps his fingers around a pencil he brushes the lead across the page, back and forth, as though drawing the teeth of a comb through a tangle of hair. He expects one of them to yield, the paper or the shy bit of gray enclosed in wood. Drawing, he thinks, is an action. He watches the paper expecting change, transformation.

Now he shifts his grip, grasping the pencil as he would a knife and resting the slant of shaved wood that narrows to a honed tip against the page. A different quality of gray.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm drawing," he says, knowing his brother's voice, not pausing the pencil's unhurried sweep. The line of arm to hand to curled fingers to pencil to the gauzy spread of gray unbroken.

"What are you drawing?"

"I'm just drawing."

A flutter at the paper's edges, a prodding at Kirpal's side as his brother hunkers down next to him. Achal breathes over the page, the chronicle of his efforts: his breath carries a faint whiff of milk. "But you must be drawing *something*."

His brother, his brilliant brother, is always pushing ahead—in speech, nudging certain words like stuck doors; in action, tearing into a run when he can no longer bear the world's staid pace. Kirpal could do without the elbow planted so close to his ribs or the overlap of their gazes, but Achal's willingness to slow down, submit to stillness for his sake, pleases him.

"I'm drawing the light." It becomes true as he says it. In the texture of the lines, the patches where his hand faltered or the lead snagged on a fleck of stone, in this he recognizes light's doomed attempt to fill empty spaces. The paper's blankness slipping out through innumerable gaps reminiscent of dust caught in the imperfect glow of a candle.

#### ii. methodical and drastic

Singh spins the pencil in his fingers. Later, the war fizzling to a false end, he'll twirl his rifle with the same disciplined restlessness. Sketching a bomb is a simple matter: one gives oneself over to precision. Everything clean, spare lines. No allowances for character.

He'll tour the bomb's components like rooms of a house. His imagination, methodical and drastic, throwing open doors that have no handles. The work suits him perfectly. His hands certain in a way that eludes him when rendering something with hollows in which darkness pools, with more than a devious mechanism at its core.

He will not keep count of how many he draws. How many of these blueprints circulate, scrolls of new wisdom, his name a glyph at the bottom.

### iii. remove

The idea presents itself to him in the guise of a game, an extension of the hide-and-seek they play. He's brought his sketchbook from the tent, carries a pencil in one of his many pockets, a tool of the trade. He rests a leg on the balcony's railing and flips open his penknife. His back to her, shearing away the wood, pausing to admire the point he's fashioned. That evening he will discover curls of wood clinging to his trousers.

“Sapper?”

He folds the knife, relishing the snap it produces, tucks it into one of his many pockets. He hasn't alerted the Englishman to his purpose—and purpose seems like a grand term for it, the scribbles he hopes to assemble into a portrait of her. The distance an essential part of it. She the last person who would ever strike a pose, the last person who would want her face committed to paper.

“Sapper, if you don't tell me what you're up to I shall be forced to guess.”

“It's safe,” he calls, though the patient has never evinced concern for his own mortality.

Kip looks out over the villa, the orchards, the garden Hana has cultivated. He's chosen a day free of wind, the pages of his book unruffled in his lap, her hair limp about her face. She's seated on the terrace, one leg pulled up underneath her, something birdlike in her posture.

“You're humming. What *could* you be doing, I wonder?”

### iv. vestige

Kirpal takes up a pencil one day and all at once it comes back to him, as if he holds the memory itself. He has succumbed to habit, lulled by its ease. His hands have become practiced in different arts. A pencil to him is a mundane object. He would reach for one to splint a broken finger before he would dream of pressing it to a clean sheet of paper, tracing the curve of a cheek.

In the clinic anything beyond need is extravagance. People howl in pain here, a knife scraping at the bottom of the throat, and Kirpal has learned to attune his ear to these sounds, to discern which are cause for urgency and which a form of reassurance. He scribbles a notation and returns to his duties, leaving the pencil at his desk.

At home he glimpses his son in a rare moment of seriousness. It descends on the boy, paradoxically, while he's at play, stacking rocks to form some mysterious architecture. The intensity in his look as he hefts a stone, turns it over in his hands. Acquainting himself with its flaws, the warps in its geography, dips and pockets like the hollows formed in the cheeks at a pucker of the lips. His face bare of its usual smile, his features stern and attentive.

A sudden tension in his son's shoulders as the structure topples and reverts to a heap, overwhelmed by the accumulation of insufficiencies. He attacks the problem anew, flinging himself on the ground, eyes level with his materials, arms spread wide as though embracing the earth.

He summons to his mind's eye the boy's expression, the play of shadow over his face. Always Kirpal has avoided drawing from memory, preferring the immediacy of a subject before him, his pencil responding to a gesture, a ripple in light. Room only for consideration of the sharpness of the lead. The only reflection one sketched in bleary gray.

But in his son's face, the solemnity that gathered there like a chance convergence of clouds that looses a brief torrent of rain, he uncovers a trace of the stone sentinels who stood guard over him in sleep. He turns away, holding the details in his mind like a cup of water he can't allow to spill, locates a pencil and feels a pang for his sketchbook (the name such an improbable alliance of haste and longevity). He shuts his eyes.

Those first uncertain lines on the page, Kirpal reaching out to the world with tentative fingers.

Outside laughter erupts.

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