

Legacy

“Damn, this entrance is nice!”

The ornate wooden doors look unfitting for the dilapidated, peeling plaster walls of the art museum. I glanced towards the right, where a stone bird statue was staring at us with shiny round eyes. It looked angry.

Song knocked on the clearly expensive wood and whistled. “Whoever built this place must’ve been loaded.”

The others ambled around, feigning confidence as they twirled their flashlights.

“Mark! C’mon!” Audrey called while pushing at the door. “My friend told me she left this door open for us.”

I got up next to Audrey, pushing half-heartedly. My head pounded as my eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. Being strongarmed into a late-night, stress-induced adventure had never been my goal in the last term of my high school career.

Finally, the door gave with a loud groan. I stared into the dark hall, the marble floors pitch black. It was as if I took one more step, I would fall into a chasm.

Song went straight in, carving a path with their flashlight. Danielle went in next, her bulging backpack jangling as she bounced from step to step. Sighing, I followed.

“Hey, why the long face?” Audrey asked.

I mustered a smile and shrugged as if I didn’t know, when in reality, my heart wanted to scream out in agony at how much I hated getting into trouble. Confrontation and risk-taking were not my strong suit. Our footsteps echoed into the old museum, and I let Audrey’s question die midair.

As if sensing my thoughts, Audrey shifted closer. “We’re graduating in two weeks, Mark,” she said quietly. “Can you believe that?”

“Yeah, I know,” I responded. I lifted my flashlight to illuminate the artwork on the walls. Why was there an art museum in a small New England town? I had no clue.

“I heard there are ghosts here,” Danielle whispered. “Of all the dead artists and curators. Spooky.”

Song grunted. “Ghosts or not, we’re here to do this.”

“You got that right,” Audrey laughed. She spun around gleefully, arms outstretched.

As we ventured further into the museum, the pieces seemed to shift and morph in the shadows. I shivered as I caught glances of portraits staring us down with soulless eyes and statues wiggling up against each other. I quickened my pace.

“What does this even mean?” Danielle laughed at one of the pieces. She leaned in closer, eyes narrowing. “It’s just a black dot in the middle of a white canvas. I could do so much better. I am definitely a much more talented artist than these old fools.” Despite her bravado, her voice trembled.

“That’s modern art for you. Giving meaning to nothing,” I said. “It’s a human thing, really, to do that.”

Nobody responded to my comment. I shoved my hands into my pockets and pretended I didn’t say anything.

After some more dark hallways, Song stopped. “This should be a good spot.”

We stood in the middle of a hallway, paintings of all kinds lining the walls. It was an eclectic set, watercolors of mountains mixed in with some black-and-white photography. I squinted at the artists’ names and failed to recognize them.

“Let’s start!” Song yelled, unzipping his bag and spray paint cans spilling out. Red, blue, purple, green, a full rainbow of shades. My toes curled at the sight. Whatever moral code I had cobbled together from awkward family dinners and cheesy YA novels is being called into question now. Before I could parse out the ethics of our actions, the others picked up the cans and started spraying. Blood-red streaks over dancing European royals. Slime-green suffocating mewling cats. Icy-white polluting glittering pristine lakes. To complete the sacrilege, Danielle blasted 2000s pop from her speaker. They all laughed and giggled as if gaining powerful wings and claws from their defilement of the art. The ghosts would not be happy, I thought.

“We’re destroying history to make history, you guys!” Song shouted gleefully, red paint staining their hands. “Poetic, right?” A fleck of red had gotten on their teeth and the tips of their dark hair.

Audrey snorted. “You’re so pretentious. We’re just here to have fun at the end of the day.” She pointed at an oil painting of a stack of decapitated heads. “Who is this Paul Lee?” Audrey laughed. “That’s a stupid painting.” She smothered each head in neon purple.

“It is kind of stupid,” I said quietly, only for no one to care. The pop music was too loud.

Audrey tapped me on the shoulder. “C’mon, Mark, you’re already here, stop being such a goody-two-shoes. Destroy something!”

I looked down at the can of yellow paint in my hands. Yellow was my least favorite color. Obnoxious on clothing, and too light for Powerpoint presentations. I sprayed a little bit on the ground, but I couldn’t see it under the bright white flashlight. I sighed and raised my head.

Song worked in big motions. They were tall, with long arms and sturdy legs, and made quick work of each piece, paying no attention to whether it was an impressionist forest or a hyper-realistic still-life. Audrey was similar, though more chaotic, choosing the most obnoxious spray paint colors to

really ruin the art. Lastly, Danielle was changing each piece to her liking, editing shapes and lines to form her very own blasphemous pieces.

I could not help but notice the futility of all this. In the next month, we will leave. One to fly across an ocean to search for meaning, to find new people to boss around. One to the other side of the country to escape wallowing in a forgotten town for the rest of eternity. And another is to wait here for creative artistic inspiration to strike like lightning.

And I, the most indecisive of them all. I hadn't decided where I was going.

"Alright, moving on!" Song commanded. Like baby ducks, we followed Song to the second floor. They made a turn and opened a rickety door. Song flipped the switch. The lights did not turn on, but I heard a crack in the walls, like branches being stepped on. "It's just a closet or something," they said.

Blazing through some more old art, I weakly painted over depictions of deaths and births, terrifying wars, and fantastical dragons. I knew these were the works of people long forgotten in history. These pieces were the only things that connected them to today's time. And we were stampeding over their memory. I swallowed my bile and tried to keep my expression under control.

Suddenly, Audrey groans. "Mark, if you didn't want to come, you shouldn't have."

"Huh?"

"I mean, I'm going to Seattle, this is the last chance I can do something in this god-awful town!" Audrey said, arms raised. "The least you could do is pretend like you're enjoying this. We need to show this stupid place who's boss!"

I gulped. "I know, but-"

Audrey rolled her eyes. "But what? Nobody will know. There are no cameras! This is a boring museum in a boring town, and all we can do now is to make it a little bit more interesting. We'll be on the news, can you imagine? Isn't that cool?"

I recognized the bits of desperation clinging to red-hot ambition in her eyes. I saw myself, decomposing and crumbling, reflected in her eyes, illuminated by the harsh pale flashlights. I shook my head and lowered my arms.

"Fine then, be boring," Audrey huffed. She turned around and continued to spray over the painting.

"Don't mind her." Song patted me on the back. "It's just, we'll all be parting ways, right?"

Just as I was about to respond, Danielle piped up. "Is that smoke or am I crazy?"

I sniffed the air. There it was, the unmistakable scent of something burning. And at the end of the hall, a flickering figure of red and orange, just about to turn the corner.

“Oh shit!” Song grabbed me by the left hand and Danielle with the other. Without realizing the consequences, I ran towards the entrance, flying down the stairs. I turned to see Audrey sprinting behind us, our bags swinging off her shoulders.

We busted out the front door. The smell of smoke already permeated the air. I panted heavily, hands on my knees. I shut my eyes tightly. Maybe I could just pretend this was some science experiment gone wrong, not literal vandalism and arson.

“Oh my god,” Audrey gasped.

I turned to see the other three, mouths agape, as the museum before us lit up the night sky in brilliant scarlet flames. The building caught on fire far too easily, like it was made out of paper mache rather than concrete and stone. Perhaps the ghosts were enacting their own sort of revenge on us, I thought. I dared not to speak that thought aloud.

I stared at the mess we left, thinking about what sort of legacy this was. We acted like this rebellion would have changed something. Like it could make someone remember us in the rapids of history. We didn't even leave paintings in our name.

“Guess there is no point to all of this then,” I whispered. But no one was listening.