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A Matter of Taste

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A Matter of Taste

Elliot wished he had worn underwear today. It hadn’t been a matter of preference, but of necessity. The load of whites had been mid-spin cycle and his drawer of cotton briefs empty. Now as he stood beneath the telling sun of the skylight on floor three of the Seattle Art Museum, he yearned for the tight fitting cotton to conceal, or at the very least minimize, the bulge between his legs.

It was quite horrifying actually. He was thirty-eight years old, for God’s sake, not a testosterone engorged pubescent. But the way the young woman leaned closer to view the tribal Gela Mask made her ass swell and her slender calves tighten, and Elliot’s dignity forced him to leave Room #15.

This was only one of perks of being a part-time security guard at the museum: the twenty-something art students from the community college that had a revolving door policy there. Their plastic frame glasses, their disheveled hair pinned back in haphazard buns, their flirty boyish bobs, their sketchbooks, their clicking high-heels, their pattering flats. Their round eyes, their winged eyes, their deep set eyes, all lingering on his. Pubescent or not, he could appreciate fine art.

Art in a more traditional sense did less for him. His position at the museum was not first on his list of ideal jobs, but it was the first on his list of highlighted classified ads to offer him an interview. He had moved to Seattle two months ago and spent weeks on the pull-out couch watching the History Channel and consuming obscene amounts of Hungry Man dinners while halfheartedly skimming online job postings. When he received the call from the museum, he knew he must do himself the favor of accepting their offer.

For being in his late thirties and on a diet of 560 calorie frozen meals, Elliot considered himself a decent male specimen. He had confident shoulders and commanding posture. Sure, his body was but a whisper of the college tennis player he once was; he’d rounded out around the middle and widened in the thighs, causing his polyester uniform pants to tauten around his groin, the seams in the hip stitching to show white. But he had eyes that magnetized others and the kind of grin that made people want to answer more than just “fine” when he asked how they were doing. He didn’t blame the libertine female patrons for looking.
Despite Elliot’s personal lack of artistic taste, he enjoyed his job. Or more appropriately, the people. In addition to the girls chasing dreams of graphic design and photography, the museum drew in an eclectic breed. Those who knew art, those who pretended to know art, those who didn’t know art but wished they did, and those who didn’t care about art. The real art people intrigued him most, the connoisseurs. Intrigued and annoyed him simultaneously. What made someone worthy of deeming something art? What qualifications made something beautiful? Elliot found it completely relative, a matter of personal preference. He was satisfied when people explained their taste by simply saying the art “spoke to them;” he understood that sometimes things of beauty choose you, inexplicably, and you had to have them.

Elliot took slow deliberate steps out of Room #15 with a final glance at the young woman's wanton posture. Arms awkwardly crossed over his groin, he turned into Room #14, The Constantine Tapestries collection. The room was empty save a middle-aged couple in the far corner reading the plaque beside an ornately woven panel depicting Constantine the Great engaged in ancient Roman warfare. The woman, wearing a pantsuit in a color Elliot associated with pretzels, was leaning right up to the glass, wire-frames propped on her forehead, lips mouthing the words she was reading. She wore her pumpkin colored hair in a blunt shoulder length cut and her lip-liner without lipstick. She appeared to be in her late forties, trying to fool people she was in her early thirties, but the direction gravity had taken her breasts wasn’t fooling anybody.

The man stood behind her, staring at the white wall in front of him with a blank expression as he re-tucked his button-down into corduroy pants. Judging by the man’s wrinkled shirt and disengaged manner, Elliot imagined the man was not used to being in a relationship, nor was he sure if he wanted to be. This try at romance had arisen more out of boredom than passion. Elliot speculated the man had tired of spending his days writing computer programs, his nights with cheap women and cheaper drinks. He didn’t really love the pretzel suited woman. But he wanted to keep her around, he just thought his moods would be above the influence of weather patterns. Evenings spent in his zipped-up loft — his only company yesterday’s press, used tea-bags and cigarette butts — made him sentimental for Idaho. Idaho with four seasons. Idaho with his furnished split-level home. Idaho where he’d found her, where he’d spent nights watching her, waiting. Elliot knew that being sentimental was dangerous; it quickly turned vile, causing these memories to resurface that both repulsed and delighted him. But often in the hours between dinner and an acceptable time for bed, he’d find himself marinating in that volatile memory. He’d replay the moments in slow motion, slipping into the salacious beauty, the power, remembering her urgent green eyes, her willful resistance, her racing heart. Then he’d remind himself that was why he had had to leave, asking himself it was worth it. The question was rhetorical.

He looked around Room #12, a feature collection at “sam” – the personification of the Seattle Art Museum which greatly annoyed Elliot. Room #12 proudly displayed the contemporary Chinese oil paintings of Wang Huaqing: A Painter’s Painter. Room #12 also proudly displayed a cluster of three leggy twenty-somethings chirping in hushed tones about the aesthetic value of post-Mao era remorse.

The blonde was quite average in all regards, legs aside. Her floral skirt and cinched waist caused Elliot’s eyes to linger longer than her face deserved. The bottle-blonde beside her was round in a pleasing way. Soft in all the right places. Elliot judged her to be a great cook and a better lover. The third had brunette hair reminiscent of a quarter horse’s mane and he appreciated the volume pressing against the buttons of her lace blouse and the subtle angularity of her cheekbones. Elliot knew by the way she stood, stocking legs slightly apart, arms the color of toasted bread akimbo, that she was a young woman who was used to getting what she wanted. She wasn’t afraid of giving orders. Elliot imagined she paid her way through art school by working as a barista at a kitschy coffee bar with open-mic nights of angry beat poetry and melancholy acoustic bands. She lived alone, but with a pet that she heavily relied on to mask the silence of the apartment. Not a cat, she wasn’t a cat person. Maybe a turtle. She longed for someone to warm the other side of her queen bed, to explore the landscape of her bare skin.

Feeling Elliot’s presence behind her, the brunette turned her head and gave him a slow smile, thin lips curving to reveal a row of white teeth punctuated by a slight gap. This unexpected detail excited Elliot. He smiled back, his swoon-worthy smile, magnetizing her eyes to his. He wanted to take her against himself, feel the shape that filled out her lace blouse; he wanted to show her how to take orders for a change, feeling her struggle as her toast-
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Bored with the couple’s disinterest in both each other and the tapestries, Elliot reassessed the situation between his legs with a subtle graze of the ancient Roman warfare. The woman, wearing a pantsuit in a color Elliot associated with pretzels, was leaning right up to the glass, wire-frames propped on her forehead, lips mouthing the words she was reading. She wore her pumpkin colored hair in a blunt shoulder length cut and her lip-liner without lipstick. She appeared to be in her late forties, trying to fool people she was in her early thirties, but the direction gravity had taken her breasts wasn’t fooling anybody.

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He walked through the arched doorway into Room #10, Paris Through the Window: Marc Chagall. This was a feature exhibit at SAM, and the crowded room reflected its novelty. An assortment of patrons scattered the floor, staring at paintings of floating lovers through squinting eyes and arched eyebrows. To Elliot’s left, a middle-aged man clicked his fingernail against his suit coat button as he tilted his head to view the art from the optimum angle. His black shoes gleamed under the gallery track lighting. Elliot wondered why he was here alone, on a Tuesday, at one in the afternoon. He looked a man who preferred the straight columns and firm dollar signs of finance to the whimsical smiles and spirals of Chagall. Perhaps he needed to get away from the office to clear his head. Fed up with the old ball and chain. Or his ex-lover, sometimes forgotten, sometimes ignored, but poignant despite the passing of time. His prepared speech got caught behind his teeth and burned the back of his throat. Heat raced through his thighs and convened between his legs, his eyes sweating, his heartbeat in his ears. This sensation, familiar like an old flame of guilt and disgust singed the pit of his stomach, but was just as quickly extinguished. Wordlessly he took a few steps in the opposite direction. Elliot stared at this woman, he realized she was staring back and he was standing too close, being too quiet. Her gray eyes darted around the room awkwardly and then to his nametag, lingering on his chest before she turned back to the French still life behind her. Elliot didn’t move for a moment. He studied her backside, the parentheses of her hips, the exclamation marks of her calves. She made him want everything he had tried to leave back in Idaho. A cool trickle of excitement ran down his neck as he considered her delicate architecture; if she was hesitant about his plan, thinking it was too sudden, he would have no overcoming her resistance. A flickering white flame of guilt and disgust singed the pit of his stomach, but was just as quickly extinguished. Wordlessly he took a few steps in the opposite direction, his skin alive and sensitive to the pinpricks of his polyester pants.

After circling Room #10 once, Elliot stationed himself in a corner a comfortable viewing distance from the espresso haired woman. Robyn, that’s probably her name. It was a bit androgynous, which felt exciting. Robyn and Elliot. Their names melted together. He watched as she gesticulated to the next painting, her movements as free as her smile. Elliot felt an inexplicable certainty. Everything about her was right. Her whole body pulsed with affirmation. It was just like the first time, he thought, easily recalling that instant of clarity over a year ago when he’d first looked in those green eyes, and smelled that auburn hair. She had been his checker at Albertson’s. Elliot had set his groceries on the conveyor: Planter’s Peanuts, paper towel and two percent milk; three items granted him access to the Express Lane and blessed serendipity. The Boise sun glaring through the windows behind her had set her hair aflame as she asked, “Paper or plastic,” eyes magnetized to his. She was so different from this woman, but both were so right for him.

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“Sorry,” she whispered, glancing up through her espresso hair with a humored grimace. Hazelnut espresso with just the right amount of milk in it. Her eyes matched the brooding Seattle clouds. She was much younger than Elliot had expected.

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As she grabbed her phone and held it up in triumph, the Latin rhythm ended on its own accord with a sharp beep. “That’s what you get for toting around everything and the kitchen sink,” she laughed uncomfortably, pushing wavy hair behind her ear with slender fingers.

She was pale in a way that Elliot imagined people often commented upon, with a strawberry glow warming her cheeks and freckles peppering her nose. There was nothing exceptional about her, but she was an exception. Elliot felt an inexplicable certainty. Everything about her was right. His whole body pulsed with affirmation. It was just like the first time, he thought, easily recalling that instant of clarity over a year ago when he’d first looked in those green eyes, and smelled that auburn hair. She had been his checker at Albertson’s. Elliot had set his groceries on the conveyor: Planter’s Peanuts, paper towel and two percent milk; three items granted him access to the Express Lane and blessed serendipity. The Boise sun glaring through the windows behind her had set her hair aflame as she asked, “Paper or plastic,” eyes magnetized to his. She was so different from this woman, but both were so right for him.

“’I’ve never seen this one!” She was saying. “Violoniste Bleue. Ignore my horrible pronunciation,” she laughed unapologetically.

“Yes, this is one of Chagall’s most famous works. See how the violinist appears to be accurately lit by the moonlight? A perfect metaphor for the high regard of the musician,” the man was saying. A connoisseur.

“Ah! See what I know,” Robyn chuckled, unabashed. She shuffled the few paces to the next painting, her movements as free as her smile. Elliot stood quietly, willing her to look at him again, so he could reaffirm what he already knew. He cleared his throat awkwardly and she glanced his way, her eyes snagging on his stare.

Elliot knew what her gray eyes said: Yes. A simple affirmation, just like those green eyes that haunted his dreams had said. Those eyes had asked for him. Paper or plastic...or me? They had begged. Me. They sparked at him for weeks behind the Albertson’s register. They’d brightened with surprise.
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Elliot began his slow tour around the room, his search for offending flash photography and hands that defied artwork boundaries excusing his lingering glances and once-overs. Sudden perky merengue notes laughed through the hush of the room, bouncing off the paintings and dancing through the quiet. Elliot turned toward the offending sound to reprimand the patron who’d ignored the posted “SILENCE YOUR CELLPHONES” notices on the surrounding walls. He approached a woman hunched over her oversized handbag in a frantic search.

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under the floodlights of the parking lot. Then later, in the shadows of his truck, they had sharpened with realization and clouded with fear. But even through their fogginess Elliot could read the request of those green eyes.

With that glance, Elliot knew he and Robyn had an understanding. *Yes* her tilted head whispered, espresso strands swimming around her shoulders. *Yes* her jutted hip whispered, her weight balanced on one stilettoed foot. But she had left it at that because both Elliot and Robyn knew the murmuring shuffle of *Paris Through the Window* was neither the time nor place.

Elliot’s shift ended at five. He looked down at his leather-banded Timex: 4:28. Robyn was only on the second floor, she had to work her way up; she’d be here for a while yet. But he could wait. He knew how to wait. He had waited before, frequenting Albertson’s on a bi-weekly basis for over a month, always purchasing less than five items so he could tease those green eyes. He often found himself unwilling to leave after their electric interactions, and at these times he would sit and listen to classic rock in his parked truck, watching her behind the large windows, illuminated in lane three. Until the waiting ended on that nondescript Wednesday evening when a late night purchase of Parmesan cheese and olives had told him it was time.

Elliot decided that when he got off his shift he would wait for Robyn in the parking lot. He would probably be able to find her car. She looked like a Volvo kind of gal. A station wagon. An older model—she wasn’t pretentious; perhaps in a hunter green, not her first choice, but the price was right. She’d probably have one of those bumper stickers that spelled “*coexist*” with all those symbols and there would be a rosary hanging from the rear-view mirror. Her pack of Marlboro Reds and vintage Zippo would be sitting in the cup-holder and an obscure indie-folk album in her center consul.

Elliot left Room #10, wanting to give Robyn her space and also leave her wondering, imagining, just like he was. Imagining her softness beneath him, imagining her resistance, the excitement, the urgency. *Yes,* he would sit on the front steps and wait for her. She would walk out the revolving door and smile shyly with her gray eyes when she saw him sitting there. She would be happy he had understood. She would act coy, afraid to look too eager, but he would take control. He would be assertive enough for both of them.

At 5:04 Elliot walked down the museum steps. The lazy Seattle drizzle carried on, a poor match for his voltaic mood. As he walked through the parking lot, he mentally played out the events that were about to unfold for the sixteenth time since he had first entered Room #10: *Paris Through the Window*. He walked down the first row of cars in search of Robyn’s Volvo, trying to look inconspicuous to arriving patrons. He ignored the spitting rain that flattened his hair to his forehead and imagined what she would say when she saw him waiting for her. He planned how he would invite her back to his loft, wishing he had changed his sheets in the last month. What if she was overwhelmed by the spontaneity of it all? Maybe she would second-guess their connection; maybe she would be put off by his forwardness; maybe she would play hard to get. But that would be okay, Elliot thought, he didn’t need to take her home; if they just went to his truck, he could clear up any doubts she may have.

At 5:13 the sprinkling raindrops turned into aggressive pelts and Elliot’s polyester uniform clung to him mercilessly. For the second time that day, he cursed his lack of undergarments. He needed to distract himself, to keep his composure while he waited; he couldn’t have Robyn catching him being so offensively male.

After circling the lot for the second time, Elliot admitted that perhaps he was wrong about the hunter green Volvo. But he dismissed this miscalculation, still confident that he was right about the things that mattered about her.

Taking a seat on the museum steps, he tapped his dress shoes on the stone step in an erratic rhythm. He checked his Timex: 5:21. The automatic doors behind opened behind him; he jumped with nerves, turning to see a young man leaving the building. 5:23.

Elliot was slightly surprised she would make him wait like this. The doors opened again, and he watched the three leggy twenty-somethings teeter past him down the stairs, his previous interest in them diluted, but not enough to keep him from starring at the slit in the back of the blonde’s floral skirt that flexed with every step. At 5:27 the doors opened again and Elliot forced himself not to look, but as the effortless cadence of tapping heels approached, Elliot knew that it was her. She had chosen him and he wasn’t going to let this pass them by.
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