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“The Weaving of Breath”

Excerpt from *The Barbershop on Ändern Straße*

“Be careful, *Liebling*.”

Marie’s body, wrapped in so many layers of clothes that she looked like a rain-heavy cloud, the grey material still fraying at the elbows, glided and pirouetted across the surface of the Spree with ease. “I wish you could come out here Grandpa. When you look down into the water’s surface it’s like floating.”

“I wish I could too.” Willhelm stood on the rising hill, ankle deep in snow. The air smelt and tasted like frozen pie crusts.

“Can’t you just try? If you moved really slow I bet you could.”

“I can’t, Marie. It’s too dangerous.” When Marie was littler, he would wrap his warm hand around her small one and guide her across the ice, looking like two winter swans. Willhelm gingerly stepped to the very edge of the bank and looked down.

A deep blue like sapphire, he could see veins in the ice and patches of white and indigo where the water had refrozen closer towards the surface. Above that was the small criss-cross patterns of Marie’s and countless other children’s tracks. And on top, almost indistinguishable, was Willhelm’s bare reflection. A blocked out shape. Just a few weeks prior, he had taken his granddaughter to this same patch of weeds to go fishing. Sitting on a rock with a tub of worms between them, the water had been a whole other animal. Quick and charging, he had to warn Marie not to get too close where she might fall in. Now, Marie floated across the surface. Since he had been a child, Willhelm had always thought winter was like being thrown into a foreign landscape. In his sleep he had been transported to a planet halfway across the galaxy.

“Marie. Come take a break for *Mittagessen*..”

She met him at the same rock they had cast their poles from, now half-buried in snow. They ate in silence as Willhelm watched the sky and Marie read. “What are you reading?”

“*The Promised Land* by Mary Antin.”

“Will you read me something?”

Immediately, she flipped through the book to find a certain page and began, “And yet here is where I falter. Not that I hesitated, even for the space of a breath, in my first steps in America. There was no time to hesitate. The most ignorant immigrant, on landing, proceeds to give and receive greetings, to eat, sleep, and rise, after the manner of his own country; wherein he is corrected, admonished, and laughed at, whether by interested friends or the most indifferent strangers; and his American experience is thus begun. The process is spontaneous on all sides, like the education of the child by the family circle.”

“Ahh, beautiful. A story about America?”

“A true story too. Mary immigrated to America from Russia. I asked the librarian about all the books they had from other people who have moved there too.”

“Are you nervous about leaving?”

“A little.” Marie kicked her feet against the frosted boulder. “Why won’t you come with us?” Her eyes were wide and brown. Two pieces of caramel.

Willhelm sighed. “Your parents are young. You, even younger. And the move will still be hard on the three of you. There’s a lot of reasons why a person should or shouldn’t move, but, simply, Marie, I am too old.” She nodded. “There will be letters. Every week I will write letters. Will you write to me?”

“Yes.” She stopped kicking.

“Then we won’t be so far apart will we?”

“No,” she said, but already they both could feel the thawing of the river in front of them.

The melting and shifting of the platelets of ice.

Excerpt from *Kirigami*

It wasn't until they reached the sculpture hallway that he actually noticed the art surrounding him. He felt bad, his parents having paid all this money just for him to wish he was at home. He tried to pay attention to the plaques underneath each installment. He was now surrounded by white marble women and horses made out of their own shoes. Then they were looking at a fellow named Florent Moreau's work. Each piece was of a different medium but somehow Stephen could feel a sort of connection between them all. He loved the feeling he had standing there. He was just another installation. One next to a glass sculpture that caught his eye. Multi-colored, he could not make out what the formless figure was supposed to represent, yet he drew nearer. The light from above bounced off of its smooth surface and still he could not see his own reflection. He loved that. Noticing no security guard around, he reached out and slipped one finger down its polished side before a voice caused him to jerk his hand back.

"You're not supposed to do that." Mrs. Brooks was beside him. Looking around, he saw that they were the only two from his school left in the exhibit. "But it's okay," she whispered conspiratorially. "I sneak a few touches in too." Making a big deal about checking the perimeter of the room, she quickly stuck her hand out and poked the statue.

"So, I have something for you." She felt around her purse and pulled out the half-formed dolphin. She handed it to Stephen. "Sorry it got a little crumpled in my bag."

"Thanks." Stephen flipped it around. It was still good enough to work with.

"I should be thanking you. I loved the panther you left on my desk last week."

"Like the Rilke poem."

She nodded. “*Wunderbar*. This is my favorite exhibit. Did you know Moreau was an immigrant? He moved to America when he was just nineteen.”

“Alone?”

“Starting in New York, he made it all the way over to Cali. He was inspired by the people here in the late seventies. And the drugs. He was, unfortunately, addicted to heroin. But this exhibit is my favorite. Don’t you think he really captured what waves feel like?”

Stephen studied again the pieces nearest him and realized that the cohesiveness he had picked up on earlier was because each sculpture was inspired by the same subject. Each one was looking at the same wave through a different set of binoculars. Some with scratched lenses. Others tinted. And a few like the lenses had been replaced with funhouse mirrors. “Yeah, I think so.”

“My own family came here from Germany. I was pretty young at the time, but I still remember my life before. Mostly my grandpa.” She laughed. “He was a barber and he used to cut my hair. You can imagine the jokes I got in school.” Stephen tried but he couldn’t really picture anyone being rude to Mrs. Brooks. “Moreau’s work always reminds me of that time in my life. It’s like diving into memory.

“I heard Jake ask you about this elusive Trevor boy. Is he a friend of yours? If you know what school he is from I could help you find him.”

Stephen started to put the dolphin with the rest of the unfinished paper pieces in his backpack. “Did Moreau ever go back to France?” She shook her head. “What about you? Did you ever go back to Germany to visit your grandpa?”

“No. Sadly my parents couldn’t afford to go back until I was much older. By then he’d already passed away.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, but it’s okay. I think it’s important to remember him but... what I had there was over as soon as we boarded the boat for New York.”

“Yeah.”

“You sure you don’t want to find your friend? There might still be room in the present for you guys.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He figured Trevor wasn’t looking for him, if he was even there at all. He figured he no longer cared.

“Let’s head back then. I think the rest of the group should be packing into that oven we call a bus right about now.”

Excerpt from *The Cleavage of a Well-Intentioned Couple*

People politely crowd between starch white walls as the last of the sun's rays shine the top of their heads. I look up at the high windows to avoid watching the sea of people. The senior discount has pulled every man and woman over sixty-five from the trifecta area.

"Excuse me," I try to make my way between an old man in a damn *Patriots* hat and a brittle lady who can thank her wooden cane for standing. Neither move. In fact, the woman inches closer. "Excuse me," I say louder. Jumping, she finally moves. We pass through.

"That was rude," Steph throws at me. Immediately I stop moving; I turn and look at her. *You lead then.* She sighs and I have a new view of her hair (straight this time) and her red dress that whips around her.

"I'm sorry," I say, now realizing how big of an ass I'm being. Almond will surely hear of this next session. "Let's have a good time."

"Okay."

"I want to have a good time with you."

"Okay," she repeats, stopping in front of a large painting of what looks like pansies dancing in a blizzard. "You sure you aren't just here because of Dr. Almond."

I nod. "I've never been. Even when you used to work here."

She glances at the old couples passing slowly by. A tsunami of arthritis and hemorrhoid cream. Exhaling again, she says quietly "okay" for a third time but I only know this by the circle her mouth made.

"Show me what you used to do."

“Well, I was in charge of hanging the art and prepping the gallery before they moved me to the front.” She points at a metal statue on top of its pedestal. “Those were the worst type of things to set up. I always worried I’d break it.”

“Did you ever break anything?”

“No. I saw someone who did though.” I laugh but she just stares at the copper tiger, remembering.

“Alright... where’s this new exhibit?”

I follow her as she finds the laminated signs labeled “Stephen Aksoy.” Each one we see seems to add seven more people to the gallery. Her elbow plunges into my chest as we cramp together.

Finally, the hall we are in opens up to the largest room yet.

“It’s rarely ever this busy.”

At first, there are so many people that I can’t even see what we are supposed to be viewing. It isn’t until we’ve wandered halfway in that I see the first one. Directly ahead it stands, parting between the elderly. A peacock. Erect, it is gazing right at us, the fan of its tail opened to the world. I follow its tall, thin neck. Atop its head stand a few stray feathers, but what stops me in my tracks is that everything, all three feet of it, is made from only paper.

A group of women cut through my view. “Let’s get closer.”

With each step the bird begins to breathe through the heads of strangers. By the time I get close enough I swear its chest swells up and down.

“How long do you imagine it took him?” I ask Steph.

“Most people would say too long, but once a glass artist told me that artists always think not long enough.”

I inspect the creases used to make the ruffled chest. All of the cuts in each tail feather so delicate, under the air conditioner, that they wave slightly. Instead of color, the artist ingeniously used separate layers to suggest hue. *Not long enough.*

“I don’t know what’s worse,” Steph whispers.

“What,” I turn away from the rippling plume on top of the peacock’s head.

“That you slept with another woman or that I’ve been expecting this to happen since we got together.”

I stare at the hemline of her collar because I cannot look any higher than that and the bird is forgotten now because suddenly Steph accuses me and there are so many people around. A few of them shove us aside. “How do you know.”

“You were late from work. You said it was because your truck was making weird noises cause of the transmission and you needed to buy transmission fluid before you could get it to the shop. You always have transmission fluid and you never took the car in.”

“Well, it wasn’t mine- it was my coworker’s car.”

She steps her feet closer together and lifts her chin barely... almost imperceptibly.

“Which coworker.”

Every geriatric pair of eyes is on us and I say “Abby.”

Slowly, she nods. “Do you ever feel that way? That itch in the back of your head everytime I walk out the door?”

“No,” I breathe. “No, I’ve never worried that you would cheat... It wasn’t like how it was with us though. I have no intention of continuing anything with her.” But my palms have dried and I realize that I don’t really care to defend myself. Yes, that’s it. I do not have to lie awake anymore and I can pack all of my stuff, my office, my tools, and get a small apartment. One closer to the sight, and...

“Come on.” I can do nothing but stare at her. I expected her usual burst of tears. I even waited for her to scream at me. Her eyelids droop and the iris’ beneath them are unbuffed rocks.

“Come on, let’s go to the cafe.” Her hand stretches out to mine. More senior citizens pass around us but no one seems to want to break the line from me to Steph anymore. Her reached out arm remains rigid.