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Naked

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Naked

Dahlia felt a certain dizziness, the rush of a twenty-five-year-old memory, as she let herself be jostled through the crowd in the museum's vast atrium. Overhead the sun was setting and streaks of orange burned through the glass ceiling, painting strips of light on top of the heads moving into the main gallery. The glow combined with her nerves cast a strange aura about the room. The colors were too saturated, the blues and greens too bright.

"Dahlia."

Harry's hand slipped into hers and anchored her momentarily. "I keep losing you in this crowd."

She tightened her grip on his hand. "Sorry. It's packed. I had no idea it would be so popular."

Harry chuckled. "The opening of E.M. Gregory's new show? I'm surprised they don't have riot police guarding the place."

Dahlia smiled faintly at him. She knew it was only a matter of time before he slipped into his art history professor voice and started marveling at the brushstrokes or chiaroscuro techniques in a still life. She knew this, and she loved him for it. But she had not come to see E.M. Gregory's new show, to marvel at the never-before-seen works exhibited for the first time in a posthumous tribute to the artist. She had only come to see one painting in particular, one in E.M. Gregory's series of nudes that *The New York Times* had dubbed "an exquisite and breathtaking view into the human psyche."

Harry was already walking forward, tugging her along like an eager child. He had taught a seminar on Gregory and his contemporaries, and Dahlia could tell that the chance to see these previously unknown works made him almost giddy with excitement. She wished she could match his enthusiasm, but a sharp twist of fear behind her ribs inhibited her. The entrance to the gallery loomed ahead, a massive black-and-white photograph of the artist suspended above the glass double doors. Dahlia

could feel the enormous eyes on her as she followed Harry through the crowd. E.M. Gregory was young in this picture, maybe thirty. Definitely taken before the decade of heavy drinking that would put ghosts in his eyes and carve gorges in his olive skin. It was a photograph from the time she knew E.M. Gregory—before he was E.M. Gregory, when he was still Elliot and she was his model.

Maybe there were a million reasons why she did it. She was young, she was impetuous. It was the summer before her senior year of college, her last chance at carefree living before graduation and impending adulthood. She had only just moved out of her parents' home into a real apartment—no more dorm rooms for her—and had paid her own rent for the first time that morning. Seeing her name shine in the wet black ink on the check gave her a restless tingle in the backs of her knees. Her legs propelled her from her apartment, down four flights of stairs, onto the sidewalk and into the sultry air. It was New York City in August; she could taste the melting asphalt with every intake of breath. The midday sun glared off the skyscrapers and left her coated in a sheen of sweat that clung to the back of her neck and the hollow in her collarbone like a second skin. So maybe this was the only reason she did it: the heat.

The ad was tacked to the bulletin board outside the university student center, its bottom fringed into little tear-off scraps with a name and a number. She had been hoping to find a free movie screening or a jazz concert, but instead she found the ad. NUDE MODEL NEEDED FOR PAINTER, it read. Pays \$8/hour.

Dahlia worked part time as a waitress. She could use the money. And it was so damn hot.

Her parents were salt-of-the-earth, no-nonsense Lutherans. Her mother taught Sunday school; her father sang in the church choir. They would die if they knew their daughter was taking off her clothes for money. But Dahlia was a grown woman. She was slender and pretty; why shouldn't someone paint her? She tore off the slip of paper and dug into her purse for change. Maybe if the ad hadn't been posted next to a pay phone, she would have shoved the number in her back pocket and forgotten about it. But the opportunity beckoned to her, so she dropped

a quarter in the slot and dialed. She would wonder later how she'd missed it, that tremor, the balance of her universe shifting ever so slightly.

“God, Dahlia, this is amazing,” Harry said, halting suddenly in front of a portrait of a little boy. Dahlia felt dizzy. A quick glance around the room confirmed that this was a safe place. Landscapes and clothed figures. She exhaled. The nudes hung in a room beyond here.

“Look at the eyes. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He edged closer to the painting and leaned forward, his hands clasped behind his back. Dahlia steadied herself on his shoulder.

“Explain it to me,” she said. This was her line. She had been saying it since she met Harry twenty-four years ago, when he was still a graduate student in art history at Columbia. He was the TA for her Early Christian Art class; she came to his office for help on an essay and left with dinner plans. She was hesitant about their relationship at first, until he revealed that he had flunked art in high school. He possessed no artistic talent whatsoever, but he worshipped Botticelli the way some people worship God. He took her to art museums on weekends and gestured rapturously at his favorite paintings, explaining the significance of each flower or perfectly arranged apple. Dahlia let him lead her through these exhibits, marveling at how Harry could find something new to say about each of the myriad crucified Christs and their respective bloodied extremities.

“The eyes are almost glimmering,” Harry said, gesturing to the boy’s face. “You just know in the next second he was going to stick his tongue out or throw a water balloon at you. This isn’t just a frozen moment, it’s vital and alive.”

He started to go on about the juxtaposition of something with the temporal immediacy of something else, but Dahlia had already tuned out. She was already imagining the life story of this little boy. The painting was titled *John, 5, Sitting*. She wondered where John was now, if his hair was still cornsilk yellow or if it had darkened with age. He would be about thirty now. Maybe his mother kept a copy of the portrait in the living room. Maybe he was here in this museum right now. Or maybe he never knew that Elliot had become E.M. Gregory and had no idea that thousands of people were awestruck by this single image of him as a child.

Dahlia had not possessed any desire for such fame or immortality. She was expecting nothing more than a good story to tell at a bar to her girlfriends or future suitors. In fact, she had assumed that this guy would be a typical New York starving *artiste*, the kind who did bad Cubist portraits of meth dealers with paint made of his own blood and complained that nobody understood his aesthetic.

But his voice on the phone was soft and free of pretension. He gave her the address of his studio and told her to come by on the weekend. She walked the ten blocks that Saturday, still not fully aware of what she had gotten herself into, and buzzed 62B. It was only when she stood at the threshold of his apartment that she realized she was going to be naked in a strange man's home. Heat flooded her face. By the time he got the door open she was trying not to hyperventilate.

He was very handsome. Even in her terror she couldn't help but see that. His eyes were sea-glass green and he had two-day stubble on his face. "You must be Dahlia," he said. "I'm Elliot."

Her hand was sweating, but she could not avoid the handshake. Her fingers left damp slug trails on his palm. He stepped out of the way so she could come into the apartment. It was a strangely intimate moment; she felt like his lover or his mistress. Had she shaved her legs that morning? She wondered if her underwear waistband would leave a mark on her skin.

Elliot was talking, explaining something about this project and his summer classes at Pratt. She followed him numbly into what she assumed must be his studio. It smelled faintly chemical. There were canvases propped up along the walls, palettes balanced on every flat surface, industrial lights clamped to metal stands. She noticed a twin-sized mattress shoved into the corner, its dark blue sheets crumpled. There was also a narrow kitchen, divided from the rest of the room by a waist-high countertop. Mundane realities like sleep and sustenance were pushed to the outskirts of the room; it was clear his real love was here, centered amid the turpentine and tubes of paint.

He dragged a forest green couch to the middle of the room. Late afternoon sunlight poured in from the skylight overhead.

"So, if you don't mind, I'd like to get started soon, before I lose the light."

A few moments passed before Dahlia realized she was supposed to respond to this.

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

“Would you like anything to drink? Water, tea?”

Dahlia would have preferred whiskey, but she just shook her head.

“All right, then,” he said. “I’ll step out for a moment and let you get ready.”

She could not tell what would be worse: Elliot leaving now and re-entering when she was naked, or him witnessing the undressing. The door clicked closed behind him with an air of finality. Okay. Clothes, off. She considered this. Leave them at the foot of the couch, for easy access? Or fold them neatly and leave them on the table? There was a bathrobe draped over an empty easel—was she supposed to put that on? And what, take it off again when he came back in?

Suddenly she realized she had been standing frozen for a solid thirty seconds. What if he came back in when she was only halfway undressed? Her face heated up again. In a panic she stepped out of her underwear and kicked them aside. Now the dress, which zipped up the back. The logistics of stripping had not occurred to her that morning. She almost dislocated her elbow trying to tug the damn thing down. It fell in a crumpled heap around her ankles. Lastly, the bra. She unhooked the clasp in one motion and tucked it under the dress. There. Naked.

The room seemed too big. She was usually only naked in her four by six bathroom, the walls close enough to contain her, to keep her safe. She wrapped her thin arms around her chest and perched on the edge of the couch, remembering childhood bathtimes, folding in on herself for warmth while her mother tested the heat of the water.

Now what? Was she supposed to pose herself, to arrange herself becomingly on the couch? Was he going to come back on his own, or was she supposed to call him back? She waited a few more seconds, listening for creaks in the floor that would indicate his approach. It was hard to hear over her blood pounding in her ears. She decided against the posing and remained as she was, prim and terrified, knees clamped together.

“Um,” she said finally. “I’m ready.”

Gooseflesh prickled on her legs as cool air rushed into the room. Elliot strode in and went right to his paints, barely noticing the naked

woman on his couch. She couldn't tell whether to be insulted or relieved. She watched his back as he sifted through tubes of paint.

"Can you believe how hot it is?" he said. "I mean, even for August."

"Yeah," she croaked. Was she really talking about the weather with a man who could see her nipples?

He turned back to her with a fistful of brushes in one hand and a palette balanced on the other. She tried to remember how to unlock her joints.

"All right," he said, his face popping into view again. "If you could lie down on the couch."

It took a moment for her limbs to obey. She lifted her feet off the floor as if they were joined at the ankles and set them on the couch. She had to uncross her arms for balance and her breasts escaped.

"Stretch out a bit more? Right hand resting on your forehead, left on your collarbone."

It was like playing Twister in Russian. She couldn't figure out her directions for a full second.

"Great, just like that. Now relax."

She almost choked out a terrified giggle. Relax. Right. Her heart thumped a deliberate rhythm. *Why. Why. Why. Why.*

"All right," he said again. "Eyes on me. Good. Now hold still."

That part she could do. Her whole body was tensed into this position of repose. It occurred to her that this was the first man to see her wholly naked. Of course there had been the high school boys and their awkward, fumbling hands trying to work out the mechanics of her bra, the bold ones who even made it so far as the zipper of her jeans, but not one of them had ever gotten this far. Then again, she had taken off her clothes herself. She didn't know if this was something to be proud of or just pathetic.

Maybe a half hour later, the muscles in her neck relaxed. There was only so long one could be terrified. The fact of her nakedness slipped briefly out of her consciousness when she realized she was watching him as much as he was watching her. He had told her to keep her eyes on him, so she had an excuse to stare while he worked. She followed his gaze as it moved over the contours of her body. It was neither the lustful eye of a lover nor the clinical one of a doctor. He was very professional. He

lingered just long enough to dab the paint onto the canvas before moving on.

She thought about this curious relationship, the mutual gazing. Dahlia had been taught not to stare, to keep her eyes on the straight and narrow. But here she had license to watch and to see! She studied Elliot as he worked. He was left-handed. Dried paint crusted the edges of his fingernails. He dabbed his brush on his bare arm as he went along, until there was a whole rainbow of smudges arcing over his wrist. She became very attuned to what he was doing; she could tell by the rhythm of his hand when he was blocking out a broad expanse of canvas and when he was detailing the shadows of her face.

The light was almost gone now. She guessed maybe two hours had passed. Elliot set his palette down.

“I think that’s all for today,” he said. “I’ll let you get dressed.”

He left the room and she put her feet on the floor. Well. She had done it. Surprisingly, she didn’t ache with stiffness. Somewhere along the way she had relaxed, and standing up now felt a little like getting up from a nap. A giggle escaped her mouth and percolated in the silence. For a moment she gave in to the giddiness and shook out her whole body, reveling in the ridiculousness of the situation. She was naked! It seemed depressing to think about putting her dress back on. She had tasted courage and freedom and walking out of this apartment dressed properly seemed schoolmarmish and staid. With some reluctance, she stepped back into her underwear and pulled the dress on over her head, noticing the texture of the cotton on her skin. It felt strange.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” she said, wondering briefly if there would be some kind of morning-after awkwardness between them.

But of course there wasn’t, because Elliot was a professional. He came into the room with an envelope of cash. He thanked her and told her she’d been a great model and that he’d be in touch about scheduling further sessions. Dahlia left a little lightheaded. There was something so mercenary about their goodbye. He had seen her naked and made art from her image. She had ventured into new territory, tested her limits. But the money cheapened this feeling somehow, reducing the entire experience to a simple transaction. She felt less like a muse than a whore.

It was only when she was back in her own apartment, taking off her clothes in the dim light of her bathroom, that she realized she had not even seen the painting.

Harry's excitement had reached new levels.

"It's incredible," he said, gesturing around the room. "This is just his student work, and already you can see him growing out of the derivative, art-school stuff. His own style is emerging—the characteristic brush stroke, the ecstatic use of color—amazing. Just amazing."

Dahlia felt him bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. The action was incongruous with his thick-rimmed glasses and sweater vest. For a moment he seemed to her a child in a grown man's clothing. His eyes were a little wild as he surveyed the rest of the paintings, trying to decide where to go next. He was distressed, and Dahlia knew it was because he wanted to spend the rest of the evening in front of *John, 5, Sitting*, and also wanted to see every single work in the exhibition. She felt a sudden surge of affection for him. It was distant, as if he were a character in a movie who had done something charming. Harry did not know this, of course, but she felt this way about him often. Sometimes when they were at dinner parties, separated by a room full of people, she would mouth to herself, "That's my husband." Husband. As if saying it out loud would finally make it real to her. She watched her hand now as he pulled her to the next portrait. It didn't seem to belong to her.

Dahlia had wanted Elliot to call again, only because she wanted to see his progress on the first painting. She owed it to herself. One more session, then she would be done for good.

And maybe if Dahlia had been a terrible model, if her knees had never loosened up, if she carried more tension in her mouth, Elliot would not have called again. But as it turned out, she was a good model, and Elliot asked her to pose the next weekend. And the weekend after that, and the one after that.

Dahlia never quite got over the terror that thrilled through her when Elliot left her alone to get undressed, but it became a strange sort of high for her. She loved the feeling of the adrenaline seeping away, the heaviness

settling into her limbs. Three or four hours of posing became meditative. Elliot stopped giving her cash.

“Just write up a tab,” she told him. Once the uncomfortable monetary situation was out of sight, she began to enjoy herself.

As it turned out, she never told her girlfriends this story, even when they went out together for their weekly Friday happy hour. It just didn’t seem like something you told a bunch of tipsy girls clutching margaritas. And even if she had wanted to tell them, she didn’t know if she had the words. The first time he showed her the finished painting, she hadn’t been able to speak. Later she would tell Harry that she just didn’t *get* art, but she didn’t need a PhD to know how Elliot’s work made her feel.

“It’s me,” she said finally, almost surprised.

He laughed nervously. “Well, yes. I paint what I see.”

“No, I mean—it’s *me*. That’s what I look like.”

He laughed again but didn’t say anything. She didn’t bother trying to explain that she was surprised at how beautiful she looked. He hadn’t gone out of his way to flatter her with this portrayal; it wasn’t as if she suddenly had fuller breasts and redder lips. But he had looked at her, and he had seen, and he had found every beautiful thing about her and put it on the canvas. No one had ever looked at her that way before.

Harry was already in the next gallery, whose muted gray walls set off the fantastic colors in the paintings. A placard labeled this as his Rainbow Period. This work was from much later in his life; she was relatively confident her painting would not be in this room.

Then again, she wasn’t sure she would be able to find herself in her painting at all. By the time she met Harry, so many years ago, she had already made herself unrecognizable. Harry never knew the woman Elliot painted. The burnished red tangles of hair had been cropped short in anger and dyed a sensible businesswoman brown. Now, almost fifty, she was entirely transformed. She had fat on her hips and stretch marks on her stomach from bearing three children. Her breasts were starting to sag. There were lines on her face, creases of age and worry and heartbreak. And her eyes looked so tired. She wondered if, given the chance, Elliot would be able to find anything beautiful in her now.

She hadn't just enjoyed feeling attractive, though. Sometimes she stayed after her clothes were back on and the paint was drying on the canvas. She washed his paintbrushes and made him explain the mysterious tools in his drawing desk. She learned the difference between 9B and 7H graphite. He taught her how to keep perspective drawings in proportion by judging lengths based on a pencil held at arm's length. Sometimes he'd put on a pot of coffee and they would sit together at his kitchen table, talking and listening to the machine percolate. She laughed at the contents of his refrigerator (alcohol, ketchup, peanut butter) and when she learned that sometimes he ate nothing but Ramen for weeks so he could afford paint supplies, she took to bringing him bags of fresh fruit from the stand near her apartment. Cherries, peaches, strawberries—even years later she still associated these tastes with that summer. He told her he would have to take up still-life.

She understood now the intensity of his stare, though it had unnerved her at first. It wasn't just the striking green of his eyes; it was the way he looked at her, even when they were just discussing the heat wave or how much she hated waitressing. He always held her gaze a moment too long, until she could feel her face flush. But this behavior was beginning to make sense, because she found herself noticing things in her world that she had missed before. The particularly beautiful filigree shadow a wrought-iron balustrade threw on the sidewalk. The symmetry of two sisters sitting in the sandbox at the park playground, their heads bowed together over a lumpy castle. The way light caught in the folds of an old woman's shawl as she stepped on the escalator at a subway station. Of course. Once you paid attention, you realized there was so much to see.

Even with her newfound understanding, she still teased Elliot for his obsession with detail. He made her adjust her poses down to where her eyelashes brushed her cheek. Knee here, elbow there. Tuck the ankle. Fingers relaxed. However obedient her limbs were, her hair was ever tormenting him—the light coming in from the window made her hair glow too brightly; on humid days she sported a fuzzy halo of red frizz. One afternoon he had her spiral a curl around her finger until it would drape properly over her shoulder.

“Wanton ringlets,” he said, coming close enough that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her collarbone.

“What?” she asked, shifting forward onto her elbows.

“Nothing,” he said, stepping back. “It’s Milton, from *Paradise Lost*. Lean back again, please.”

She looked it up later. It took her almost three hours holed up in the public library to discover the singular phrase, but she found it. It was how Adam described Eve when they were together in Paradise, naked and shameless.

There were other paintings in his studio. Landscapes, some abstract pieces. But the ones she paid attention to were the portraits. Specifically the study of another young woman, the same green couch. Dahlia wasn’t sure what to think. She felt a twinge of something like jealousy.

“Who’s that?” she asked once when she was feeling bold. Her clothes were back on and Elliot was washing brushes in the deep paint sink by the window.

“Helen,” he said without looking up.

She leaned in close until Helen’s face blurred into peach smudges, her hair a slash of burnt umber.

“She’s pretty,” Dahlia said. She watched Elliot’s shoulders shrug. “Don’t you think so?” she pressed. She stepped back again, trying to look at the painting objectively. Helen had a high forehead and her hair curled into little tendrils by her ears. Dahlia noted with some consternation that Helen also had very full breasts with perfectly symmetrical nipples.

“I don’t really think of it in terms of beauty,” Elliot said now, shutting off the faucet. He turned around and leaned against the sink, considering the painting. “I just like to see things and put them on the canvas. If you start adding beauty into the equation, you miss what’s really there. I don’t want to cloud my judgment.”

“Oh, come on,” Dahlia said, teasing now. “You didn’t think she was the least bit pretty?”

He rolled his eyes. She grinned and turned back to the canvas, making kissing noises and pretending to moon over the painted face.

“What, you didn’t have a little bitty crush on her?”

“Please,” Elliot scoffed. “I can’t let myself get distracted like that.”

Her smile must have faltered, because his frown softened suddenly. “It’s nothing personal, of course,” he said. “It’s just, you can’t look at the world like that if you want to be an artist. At least if you want to be a good one.”

Dahlia dropped her hand from the canvas. “Look at the world like how?”

He looked away from her and back to the painting, as if he were trying to catch Helen’s attention.

“There isn’t room for that kind of attachment in what I do,” he explained. “Things like attraction. Or love. It muddles your vision. Stops you from seeing clearly.”

Then he went back to scrubbing paint off his hands. Dahlia stayed in front of the painting for a long time, looking at Helen and wondering if she had ever sipped coffee from one of Elliot’s blue-glazed mugs. She decided that Helen had not.

Harry never spoke of love like this, as if it were an obstacle. Even when he admitted that the thought of her distracted him from grading papers and made him forget what he was talking about in the middle of his lectures, he said it with gleeful acceptance. The first time he told Dahlia he loved her, his hands were shaking and he confessed that he’d been wanting to say it since their second date. They were sitting in a restaurant together, celebrating their two month anniversary. She looked down at her bitten fingernails and wished, fleetingly, that for Harry’s sake she were another woman. But then he was looking at her with such hope and terror that she had to still his trembling hands and say, “I love you, too.” It wasn’t a lie, which surprised her. She thought of the way his body curved protectively around hers in the darkness when she slept over at his place, how he called her to say goodnight when they were apart. He made her laugh while she waited for her clothes to spin dry at the laundromat. He knew that she liked her movie popcorn with no butter, extra salt. It wasn’t wrong to tell him she loved him. It just gave her an odd sensation in her limbs, like the spaces between her bones were too small. An unsettled feeling that took a long time to fade, even when they were back in his apartment and Harry was whispering his nicknames for her in her ear. “Marigold. Tulip. Tigerlily. Chrysanthemum.” A whole bouquet. “Dahlia, Dahlia, Dahlia.”

Elliot called her Doll. It was an accident at first, Dahl, a call not fully formed. But it stuck, because she was his life-size doll and posed the way he wanted.

“I love painting you,” he said once. His voice was low, as if this were a confession. Then he stood up straighter, cleared his throat. “I think it’s your hair. I’ve never seen that color red before. I would need to paint it a thousand more times to get it right.”

Their eyes met over the canvas and for the first time in her posing experience she felt trapped. She wanted more than anything to get off the damn couch and go to him, but she couldn’t, because the shadows playing off her hands were perfect the way they were. She was a butterfly, pinned to a card, when all she wanted was to flutter around his light, to dust his eyelashes with the iridescence of her wings.

She shifted her pinky a millimeter to the left.

“Hold still, Doll,” he reminded her.

She longed to tell him certain things. Things like how she loved the smell of asphalt during a September rain, but not as much as she loved the whiff of turpentine that lingered in the air when he passed by her. How she’d learned the names of all the colors he painted with. Cadmium yellow, alizarin crimson, titanium white, burnt sienna, phthalo green. How she whispered his name like a prayer every night before she fell asleep.

While he painted she thought about making love to him. One of his cracked-paint hands reaching out for her, not to arrange her limbs or brush hair out of her eyes, but to touch her, to pull her over to the mattress with its wrinkled navy blue sheets. She thought about him streaking a line of ultramarine blue down the valley between her breasts, circling her navel with his thumb. Pressing a cadmium red palm to her heart. Connecting her freckles with naples yellow. She could almost imagine how it would feel, the cool paint slicked onto her skin. Elliot kissing her ribs until the paint dried, until his lips were blue and red and yellow. The bed beneath them might look like a Pollock, or a kindergartener’s finger painting.

All this while he painted only ten feet away. It was too close and the farthest of distances. She didn’t know how to be this way, how to want two completely different things at the same time. She wanted him to put down the brush and kneel by the couch and kiss her hard on the mouth. She wanted him to stay exactly where he was and never come a step closer.

She was good at loving from afar. Pining for her favorite singer on the radio, taking comfort in the miles of crackling static and airwaves between them. Developing a tremendously inappropriate crush on her

young, 20-something pastor from the safe distance of her church pew. Flirting with her childhood best friend, Jack, who was tall and cute and as gay as they come. She relished the safety of impossible love the way some might relish a perfect kiss.

But love that smelled of turpentine and stared at her with bottle glass eyes, love that knew the particular constellation of freckles on the small of her back, love that wanted to paint her hair a thousand times just to get it right—this kind of love terrified her. She could only think in fragments. Verbs escaped her when she was in his presence, conjunctions quivered on her tongue, nouns would not be released. She had to remind herself to exhale, otherwise she might keep sucking in breath after breath until her lungs burst. She had not known it was possible to need something so badly.

Harry was still talking, but she couldn't focus on what he was saying. They were getting close to her painting, she could feel it. She wondered if Harry would be able to figure out, in spite of all the red hair and slenderness, that the subject of the painting was her.

She doubted it. When Harry looked at her, she never felt naked. Even when he watched her undress. No one but Elliot ever made her feel truly naked, all the layers of flesh and slippery muscle stripped away. Years later she still had the same dream: she was reclining on the green couch and Elliot was painting her. When she looked down at her hands, she realized she was only a skeleton.

Harry was crossing the gray room when she saw it through the arched doorway into the next gallery. A five by three foot oil painting of a nude woman sprawled on a bare mattress. She did not recognize the woman, but Dahlia knew her painting would be in this room, too.

“Go ahead,” she told Harry. “I’ll be right back. I just want to look at something.”

This wasn't entirely true. She didn't *want* to look. She needed to, in order to put this whole thing to rest. She had not gone to Elliot's funeral. This museum visit was her eulogy to him.

She locked her eyes on the floor and edged into the room that held her painting, terrified that she might catch sight of herself before she was ready. She moved along the edge of the room, reading the title cards of

each piece. *Reclining Nude. Nude Woman at the Window. Nude Woman, Seated. Woman Sleeping.* She did not know the name of her painting, but she thought she might know when she saw it.

And then she found it. *Doll, Naked.* Of course.

She closed her eyes and backed up a few steps before realizing that she could not do this all at once. This was not just any of the series of nude studies he had done of her. This was the final painting, the one she had never seen. The one he must have completed from memory, after she disappeared from his life. Her hands hovered in front of her face and she was briefly reminded of her younger self, watching through her fingers in the movie theater while a horror film flashed on the screen in front of her. As if seeing slivers of the gore might calm her racing heart or assuage her nightmares later that night.

Planting herself squarely on both feet, she spread her hands so just one eye could peek out. She squinted until the brushstrokes of the painting dulled into an Impressionist blur. With the piece looking like this, fragmented by her fingers and softened by her hazy eyes, she could almost fool herself into dropping her hands and looking at it dead on. But she knew that such a decision might send her reeling backwards, out of this gallery, out of the museum, out of the city. So she waited. She let her eyes focus again, still mostly shielded by her hands. She breathed. It felt rather like approaching Medusa, what with the way she was so braced against seeing.

But no death rattle emanated from the painting, no coiled snakes hissed at her. It was, after all, just pigment on a canvas. Someone's 25-year-old brushstrokes, a heavy wooden frame. No danger. She slid her hands further down her face, off her eyes, and blinked to clear her vision.

Ah. So. There it was, no longer filtered through her fingers or squinted eyes. The painting as it was meant to be seen. She took a deep, steadying breath. The swirling feeling in her stomach reminded her of the first time she had ridden a bike. There was exultant joy in the moment, flying down the sidewalk on two wheels. But the second she remembered the impossibility of such a balancing act, the sidewalk careened toward her, the horizon tilting.

She tried to stop thinking, just for a moment. Tried to see the painting as if it were the portrait of a stranger, as if it had not been painted by a man she loved fiercely.

A young, redheaded woman stood in a dark room. Moonlight poured over her in a stream from the skylight overhead. Her hands were on her hips and she was not smiling. The set of her lips suggested she was holding her breath, holding herself together. Her eyes were bright and wet-looking.

Dahlia swallowed hard. None of this should matter anymore. She was a different woman now. She had a husband and children and dust in her house. Twenty-five years ago may as well have been a million.

But the memory was crystallized in her mind. It was December. Elliot had forgotten to turn up the heat and Dahlia sat shivering on the couch, her nipples puckered into hard peaks. He had offered her tea, but she said scotch and soda would warm her up faster. He took the hint.

She watched while he squeezed a dab of red onto the palette and swirled his brush through it. She took another sip of the scotch and held it in her mouth until her tongue burned. It wasn't helping at all. The back of her throat ached. Couldn't he tell she was miserable? Her shivering grew violent, and maybe it knocked something loose inside her.

"Elliot."

He looked up, startled. She never spoke once they began working.

"Yes?"

She shook her head. The words were stuck at the back of her mouth. She could feel them there, rolling like marbles on the back of her tongue, but she did not know how to spit them out. Her eyes prickled. Elliot looked at her with his sea glass eyes and took a step forward. Then another.

Then he was so close she could feel the heat of his body; it made the molecules in the air vibrate faster. She sat very still. His hand hovered near her face. They were both holding their breath. It was so quiet she could hear the soda water fizzing, the bubbles hurling themselves into the air, breaking the surface like little sighs. If he would just shift a millimeter forward—

He pulled his hand back and gestured to his forehead.

“Your hair’s in your eyes,” he said. He went back to the canvas.

She felt her stomach turn over. She was starving. She had been waiting for him to throw anything her way, a scrap of affection, the most meager of bones, and he had failed her. She was shaking not with cold but with rage now, the kind of terrible anger only young people in love can harbor.

“Please,” she said. She wished her voice did not come out so cracked and desperate. “Please just tell me the truth.”

She was at the edge of the precipice, teetering. A rush of energy flooded her limbs, the same energy she felt the first time she stepped out of her clothing in his apartment, reborn. There was something exhilarating about the truth. She jumped.

“Please tell me you have feelings for me, too.”

He turned back to face her very slowly. His eyes were different; unfocused. He was seeing something else.

“I’m sorry, Dahlia.” He pronounced her name deliberately.

Dahlia understood it then. The peculiar danger of falling in love with someone was that you gave them exactly the words to break you.

“I never meant to give you the wrong impression.”

She stood up. “Please, Elliot. Give me something. Tell me it’s not just me.”

The silence roared in her ears.

“But you—you kept asking me to come back! You wanted to paint me!”

“I hired you.”

The words were steel. She sputtered unintelligibly for a moment, trying to formulate the right logic to convince him that he was wrong. What she meant to say was *I let you see inside me*. Nothing came out.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He held out the robe to her.

“No,” she said. “We have a session to finish.”

She threw the robe on the floor and went back to the couch but did not sit. She hated him then. Her knuckles were burning. She put her hands on her hips and faced him, her mouth set in a line.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Paint me. Hurry up, I’m being paid by the hour.”

“Dahlia—”

“*Paint me.*”

The haze cleared from the bottle green eyes and he picked up the palette. She made eye contact with him and saw him wince. Good. He bent his head over the paints. Her eyes stung with concentration. *Look at me*, she thought. *Look at me*.

Her eyes were stinging again as she stood in front of the painting. She heard a familiar cadence of footsteps behind her.

“Oh,” Harry said.

It was more of an exhalation than a word, the sighing of air from his lungs. Dahlia could feel the weight of his breath on the back of her neck and she knew something sad had broken open inside him. It was a different type of ache from her own, but she could feel it just the same. The terrible realization that certain beauty will always be out of our grasp.

Sweet, brilliant, clueless Harry. He could talk about perspective and vanishing points and oil on canvas for hours without ever putting brush to paper. He did not create things. She tried very hard not to pity him because of that.

Harry loved her, he really did. He strived for her happiness. Years ago he had noticed how often she visited museums, how frequently she ducked into dinky, one-room galleries they passed on their afternoon walks. He thought it was a love of art. He didn't know she was looking for something.

After two years together, he proposed to her in the Met. It was January and the cold winter light sunk through the panes of the enormous glass wall where the Temple of Dendur was housed, coloring everything sallow and gray. Harry had insisted they come early on a Sunday morning when the museum was almost empty. Their footsteps echoed in the quiet, and Dahlia could see her reflection in the dark water that surrounded the temple. The surface was so still that she could also see the flash of terror in her eyes when Harry tugged her hand and knelt, fumbling with a velvet box.

She knew already what her answer would be, but as she felt the word drop from her lips into his waiting hands, she was thinking that this couldn't have felt more wrong. The Temple of Dendur was dedicated to Isis and Osiris. Lovers who saved each other. Isis gathered the pieces of her husband when he was broken and breathed life into him. How could

Dahlia be expected to hold Harry together when she couldn't even find all the pieces of herself?

She had said yes to him anyway. Because she could form coherent sentences around him, and because she was lonely and thought he could fix that. His hands were gentle. His eyes reminded her of the basset hound she'd had as a child. But even though she knew he couldn't possibly hurt her the way Elliot had, she was so much more careful with Harry. She doled out little spoonfuls of herself. If he noticed her stinginess, he didn't say anything. He accepted these offerings and celebrated them.

And she was grateful for him. He could love her the way she needed to be loved, and that had saved her. It was enough. Enough that she could marry him and have three beautiful children and be happy most of the time.

It was only sometimes that she woke up in the middle of the night and found herself unable to fall asleep again. She'd see the knobs of Harry's spine illuminated in the green glow of the alarm clock, the rise and fall of his breathing, and that old unsettled feeling would creep into her bones until she had to leave the apartment, walk down the block, turn at the Asian grocery store on the corner, and keep going until she saw the letters appear, the familiar alphabet soup that meant escape. N, R, Z, W. A, B, C. The escalator would draw her down into the yellow-lit, weatherless underworld of the subway where she could swipe her MetroCard and ride until the knots in her stomach loosened and her heartbeat slowed.

Most of the time she felt better. The feeling would pass and she could get off at the next station, take a cab home and climb into bed without Harry noticing her absence. Except sometimes she caught her reflection in the darkened window and watched it hover there until the train coasted into the next station and she disappeared. Then she saw Elliot in each window of the subway car, like snapshots in a photo album of the life she might have had. Sometimes bearded, sometimes clean-shaven, always slightly out of view so she could never tell for certain if it was him. Sometimes a woman was clinging to his hand, other times a child, and sometimes he was alone, hands tucked in his pockets as he waited on the platform for the next train. It didn't matter. A taste like panic clawed at

the back of her throat and she would have to remind herself to breathe. But then the doors would whoosh closed, sealing her in again. The train would lurch slightly, throwing her off balance, and the velocity would hurl her onward once again.

“This is something, Dahlia. I mean—”

Harry’s sentence broke off. The professorial authority had evaporated. A long silence hung between them. When he spoke again his voice was tight, wrapped around a thin wire of grief.

“She’s beautiful.”

Dahlia could not speak.

“You know,” he said suddenly, “she looks like you.”

Dahlia shook her head. “I’m old and fat.”

Harry touched her wrist. “No, you’re not. But that’s not what I mean. Look, there, the shape of her lips. That’s exactly the face you make when you’re upset with one of the kids. Like you’re angry but you could just burst out laughing any second.”

Without looking at him, she cleared her throat. “Explain it to me.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him studying the painting, as if trying to remember something long since forgotten.

“Well,” he said. “Gregory’s a genius. In one painting you can see an entire story. The woman...it’s not the first time she’s done this, but she’s not an experienced model. See the way she’s got her hands on her hips? It’s like she’s trying to put up a brave front, but look at her fingers. She’s holding on for dear life. She’s terrified. Ashamed.”

Dahlia nodded, remembering. Harry took a step closer, his gaze fixed on the painting.

“But then look at her mouth, her forehead. She’s resolute, almost defiant in her nakedness. She’s not trying to hide. And her eyes.”

He leaned forward, his expression soft, the crease between his brows smoothing. “It’s what Gregory did best. You know exactly what she’s feeling.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes. Look at her. The simultaneous terror and joy, the terrible need. She was in love with Gregory.”

Dahlia closed her eyes.

“But it’s more than that,” Harry continued. Dahlia’s eyes opened. “The brushstrokes on this woman are different than all the others. Gregory usually painted so furiously he slopped the paint onto the canvas and then smeared it into place. But not here. See? He used a tiny brush for her face. It’s delicate. And the thinness of the paint on the rest of her body suggests a very slow, very deliberate method. Even the way the light frames her is different. The moonlight just spills in from overhead and pools on the floor. Look at the way it halos her face. It’s like he didn’t need to light her because her beauty was enough on its own.”

Dahlia blinked away the sting from behind her eyes. “And what is all of that supposed to mean?”

Harry turned back to face her, his eyes shining. He smiled at her, a hard kind of smile. “Gregory was in love with her, too.”

So Elliot had loved her. Elliot M. Gregory. Twenty-five years later and she still didn’t know what the M stood for. Dahlia turned away from the painting. She looked at her husband, and he looked back at her. She thought maybe he saw something.