

Celina

She used to know who she was. Over time she became burdened with the troubles and worries of other people. The world rested heavily upon her shoulders, but no one seemed to care. With each passing year, more weight piled on, her soul weakening. She used to be happy, vibrant. But the problems and dilemmas that other people thrust on her withered away who she was. She sits there with her eyes gazing deeply into my soul, asking me whether I can free her or not. When I look at her, I never know what to feel. *Celina* is our best work here in the museum, painted by an artist named Ava. We know nothing about her, just that she signed her paintings with beautiful swooping cursive letters. To my knowledge, there are few if any other works by her. But *Celina* was too much of a masterpiece to let languish in storage. She had to hang in her own room, a shrine to unknown brilliance. A solitary bench rested in the center of the room. Usually never crowded, few people stopped to gaze at her. A hidden treasure often overlooked by mindless visitors. Her expression, the way she stares out at the viewer entrances me. In my soul, I feel compelled to help her. But I don't know how. An oil paint prison contained her ambitions, her dreams. I do not know how to feel when I look at her.

Each morning, I pay my respects to her, standing there in the obsidian room admiring her. Technique, sheer artistic skill makes her so entrancing. The dim lights and black walls envelop the viewer, making them feel small. We had a new acquisition arriving in late May. A brilliant black and white splatter painting would adorn the wall. I was experimenting, hoping that the bold choice in wall color would craft a unique experience. But the sale fell through, and no painting came. The walls remained black, and no painting seemed suitable to fill the void. The obsidian room lay vacant, then she arrived at our doorstep carefully wrapped in delicate parchment paper.

Luckily it hadn't rained, and the janitor found her gently resting on the front steps. There was no note, just a painting carefully wrapped in crumpled brown parchment paper, tied up with red string. He brought her into the main office and stayed with her overnight, waiting for anyone to walk in the next morning. We call him *Celina's* guardian angel. I remember walking in that morning and meeting her for the first time. My heels tapped with bright articulation, echoing throughout the tall narrow hallways of the museum. All was still and peaceful, no prying eyes or murmurs disturbed the sublime serenity. Lucien, a colleague of mine, ran towards me from the main office. He was sweating profusely but did not seem to mind. He had his hands tucked into the patch pockets of his olive corduroy jacket marred with coffee stains. Whenever Lucien was slightly anxious, he tapped his thumbs to each of his fingers quickly as a soothing mechanism.

“Zarah—”

“Is it any good?”, I said incredulously.

“Her name is *Celina*. I...haven't seen something like that in our museum. Curators search for pieces like this for years, hoping to find something unknown that becomes a future legend. You must see it for yourself.” He scratched his balding scalp nervously, seeming to shake with emotional fervor.

We walked into the office, greeted by the kind face of Brenda, the receptionist. She was a friendly woman that loved the company of new people. She stood up and pointed to the conference room before Lucien or I could say a word.

He pulled out a key from his pocket and began to unlock the door. “No words can describe it.”

The painting rested in the middle of the conference room table, the original parchment paper resting atop her. He pulled back the paper carefully with trembling hands. She captivated my senses unlike any other piece of artwork I had seen in many years. Her eyes seemed to yearn for release. It was hard for me to understand her at first, and I could only absorb so much of her presence in one sitting. I turned my back to her and rested my hands on my hips while casting my eyes downward. Lucien gently placed the parchment paper back on top of her. “Where can we put her?” I asked with a straight voice.

“You know where we should put her. It’s what we have been missing, the piece to fill the void.” Lucien paced around the room espousing its great beauty and how it was truly a masterpiece.

“She will get the home she deserves.” I stared out the chestnut brown conference room blinds, recovering from what I just witnessed. We had rescued her from the steps, sheltering her from the cold unforgiving world outside. She was a baby left on the doorstep, with no note. All that we knew then was that we had to take care of her. She needed a guardian, someone to watch over her for years to come.

My watch buzzed, letting me know that my ten minutes had ended. *Celina* gazed out into the empty room, yearning for someone else to view her. Sometimes I wanted to reach out and hold her hand, but I had to leave her. My soft footsteps boomed through the vast archway rooms as I contemplated my daily ritual with her. I could not help but wonder who Ava was, and where else their work might be. Even though I do not know them, I am captivated by their mystery. I would find them one day, somehow. The walls of our museum were carefully adorned with pieces that we most admired. After all, it is my responsibility as the curator to determine what hangs and what lays silently in storage. Maybe I appreciate Ava’s masterpiece because it disrupts

the male dominated collection. Too many people throughout history have been marginalized in the art world, forgotten because they questioned standards too soon. While walking to the office, I thought to myself how any of this happened, how I live here surrounded by the work of masters.

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My family never really understood art. They never tried to find meaning in it. They just liked pretty pictures that were painted well. One time, when I was around seven or eight, we went to a local museum in our city. It was...a very traditional one, limiting its collection to anything before the twentieth century. Their cherished works were primarily medieval and golden era Dutch paintings. My mother was a feisty woman, determined to prove herself to the world. She was confident, and proud to be the woman that she was. Her brilliance and intellect influenced each facet of her life. She liked to ask questions, typically large existential questions. But, if she was not depressed from grand thinking, she liked to pose unique questions. One time she asked me about dogs that jumped about in the summertime. "What do you think they're thinking about?" she asked on a cold January morning while gingerly sipping tea. "I think it's nothing...nothing at all. They're too focused on being happy in the bright sunlight that nothing else matters. Not even thinking." Some people might see questions like these as pointless and absurd. But to me, she was magnificently brilliant. You simply had to be just as curious to understand how she thought.

It must have been a Saturday afternoon because my father was there too. He never really understood my mother, no matter how hard he tried. At heart, he was a simple man, not bothering himself with large questions. Rather than trying new things or experiencing the world differently, he preferred routine and repetition. The same things never grew boring to him. My mother held

my hand as we walked about the museum while the noble figures of Dutch paintings stared out into nothing. My father was somewhere behind us fumbling with reading glasses. He always fumbled with something, keys, glasses, any item that seemed simple became cumbersome and complex in his hands. She usually cared about his actions, but today seemed different. She paid no attention to him while we walked together quietly along the corridor. I could feel her love pulsing through her hand. Without looking, I felt her smile. She seemed free, calm. Mom shared her love with the world. There were only a few moments where she was truly happy, such as humble acts of kindness or talking to someone who genuinely intrigued her. When she spoke, her voice inspired people to be grateful for being alive. On many occasions, strangers' sorrowful demeanors brightened while they talked to her. She brought joy and life into people's lives whether they expected it or not. That is what I loved most about her.

Off in the distance, a pale figure radiated amongst the mundane paintings. We walked closer, her hand still gently clutching mine. She looked at my eyes fixated on the curious sight.

“You have a good eye, my love. That one is my favorite. Out of all the medieval art, this one stands out to me. El Greco questioned conventions. He challenged ideas about how the world looks, or how it could look.” She hugged me while we stood in front of the man's weary figure. He looked up, trying to find God or some salvation in the sky above. I remember his hands and face, both elongated beyond normal human proportions. He seemed like a physical manifestation of yearning and anguish, tired of living in his existence. Mom looked about trying to make sure that my dad was close by, but not within earshot. She knelt down and gently stroked my hair. Her eyes observed every detail of my face, committing each subtlety to memory. She smiled briefly, trying to keep herself calm. “Zarah, my love, you're going to be a wonderful person someday. I can just...feel it. I wonder how you will look when you're older?” Mom

placed her hand on my shoulder and looked down at the glistening tile. She gulped softly, keeping her composure. “I want you to remember something, love. Can you make sure and remember it for me?” I gently nodded. She grabbed my small hands and enveloped them in her own. “Will you make *sure* that you remember it for a long, long time for me? I might need you to tell me one day.”

“I will mom. You don’t have to worry about that.”

Her obsidian black hair trembled as she looked down briefly before returning her gaze. “I will always love you. Please understand that I didn’t make this choice lightly or without you in mind, love. For now, you are too young to understand the details. But someday I hope to tell you why I made my choice. I hope to see you again when you’re older, as the strong young woman that I know you will be, my swan. Goodbye, love.” She wiped her eyes with a delicate maroon handkerchief, trying to maintain her composure for me. When I look back on it, I did not fully understand the situation or why she left. I felt scared, frightened by the unknown that was waiting for me. She loved me, but she left. Her hair bounced as she walked away, her stride confident. Her figure slowly faded into the bustling crowd. A sweeping seascape absorbing her, the tide reaching out its hands to pull her down into the abyss. I watched her disappear while time stood still, each footstep an eon, each echo a cry goodbye. The El Greco man looked up into the heavens, still searching for God’s salvation. After she dissipated, I stared back at him, finally understanding what he yearned for. Where are you now, my savior?

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After the incident, as my father put it, life was different. Less meaningful without her around, I mean. She brought life, vivacity to a mundane chore. If we were stuck in rush hour

traffic during a warm summer August evening, she made the world inside our car feel like a celebration. She would sing and dance about as much as possible while sitting in the driver's seat. Her voice made me feel safe. Every sound was a wave of calm amidst the turbulent sea of my childhood. Without her, that warm embrace of safety she provided died. I missed her. I still do. Sometimes I wonder what life could have been like with her around, how my childhood would be different had she stayed. Throughout the rest of my youth and young adulthood, I resented her for leaving. She abandoned me, leaving me stuck with a man who was the antithesis of everything I believed in. Where I sought meaning in art and expression, he sat contently in misery and personal turmoil. After she left, he was burdened with me. Day after day, his face conveyed distress and agony. My existence rarely changed his patterns, which made me self-reliant. When people leave, you depend on yourself. The abuse, the pain, made me trust myself more than anyone else. He made me the woman I am, strong and scarred.

I usually try and live my life outside of anyone else's control. I left home when I could, working night shifts in high school to save for my own home. He scrutinized my choices, ridiculing me for doing man's work and lacking femininity. For a while he thought I was some butch lesbian that hated men, which was highly inaccurate. Just a reflection of his ignorance and misplaced hate. But I endured his derision, finding my own meaning and purpose. I had to do what was necessary. Anything to escape him. After all those years, I could not stand another second of his agony and vile nature. He reveled in the pain of others, the misfortune of good people that encounter bad times. Divorces, cancer diagnoses, anything that he could ridicule and mock. "They had it comin'," he used to say, "God's just doing his work, makin' choices we mere men can't understand. It's all part of His plan, like they always say, His plan." My father's religious fervor came to its fullest fruition after she left. He tried to find solace in his own ways,

through personal vices. After his addictions reduced him to deplorable states, he begged for forgiveness. Actually, I should be more specific. While wallowing in his sorrows, trying to forget the worthless man he was, he fell asleep at the bar with a shot in hand. He woke up the next morning greeted by a torrential downpour while lying against the cold concrete. No keys, but he still had his wallet. Supposedly he walked straight to the church and begged for the Lord's mercy. Whatever God he prayed to did not seem to care about permanent change. The cycle of sin and repentance seemed to suffice for that God he treasured so dearly.

Next to the sofa, he kept a Bible. Night after night he claimed to be reading scripture, studying it for some hidden subtext that would provide the answer to all his problems. I watched him sit there, looking for something else to fix him. He, not any God or book, could change his state. He simply could not face his own inner demons to create change. As I grew older, I understood more why she left. Each new habit or false reform failed to manifest any change. Throughout each phase, he was the same man. Behind each mask lay the same face that could not bear to see himself in the morning and face who he really was. A mask, a façade to disguise the truth that haunted him. She could not stand to watch him wither behind those masks, growing older and weaker until there was no truth to face. Only lies were left, the truth long since departed, suppressed by will and coping. I believe that the trauma was too much for him to bear. His subconscious repressed the truth so he could wake up each morning, forgetting the truth, the trauma, more and more, slowly disintegrating with neglect.

While studying art history, I wanted to do something meaningful, that actually made me happy. People busy with tasks, meetings, and project deadlines resembled a snake eating its tail. An infinite cycle of work, one long week ending only to begin another one. Lives collapsed under the strain, friends blinded by money. All their desires were materialistic, lusting for vanity

and acclaim that could be bought with dollars and toil. They grew older, richer than the previous year. A dreadful cycle that only brought more misery than joy. Young souls lured by the promises of fortune and respect that they lacked in their current lives. Reformation after reformation, each person changed into something hideous, but their true self screamed underneath suppressed feelings. I could not be that person, a victim of convenience. Unfortunately, I married one of these people.

The rain trickled down outside the loft, the windows shimmering with each drop. Max paced around while screaming on the phone, his perfectly manicured hands waving about. While in the loft, he only wore cashmere sweaters that were ribbed in a specific manner. He made sure to buy all the colors available when he first saw them. The leather-stacked heels of his oxfords clapped against the black walnut floors, conveying his aggression and false power. Max enjoyed control, seeking to perfect everything in his life, leaving no detail unscrutinized. At first, I thought his antics were charming, his stubbornness self-assurance. But I was young, slightly naïve. We met at an art gala nearly a decade and a half ago where an art friend of mine was showcasing some of her work and other locals'. Max and I gravitated towards each other then, bonding over one particular piece entitled *Billy*. We stared at the man for what seemed to be an eternity, admiring his withered features and sullen eyes tired with age. Silently gazing at this work, he broke the quiet with insightful observations.

“She paints the truth with each brushstroke. I wish that I could paint like that,” he said with a tenor voice. He nervously tapped his champagne flute.

“Her eye seems to perceive what we choose to hide. Looking at his hands and posture, he seems lost and despondent. Looks... a little bit like my father, actually.”

“Well, what a strange coincidence, he looks like mine too.”

We laughed, amused by simple banter.

“How do you know that it is a she?” I asked, curious about the rationale of his assumption.

“I don’t know of any man that could express that degree of emotion.”

With that began an endless array of dinners at fine restaurants, expensive trips, and eventually moving in together while being engaged. That brings us to where we are now, a strained marriage fraying at the seams. Max was not the man I thought I met those years ago. Now he paces screaming at his phone while I chop vegetables for a night in. This is our lives, what I face each day I come home from the museum. Suddenly, he threw the phone at the wall, smashing it into glass and plastic. He stood there staring at me.

“Are you going to clean that up?”

“Why, it’s your phone. Pick up the pieces yourself.”

“I’m too stressed right now. I need to blow off some steam.”

“Isn’t that what you just did? Besides, you should clean up your own mistakes. I’m not your mother.”

“I don’t care. Pick it up!” Max projected his anger at whatever situation ended within his phone onto me.

“No, I won’t keep fixing your mistakes! You have to learn how to process emotions sometimes.”

“I don’t *want* to learn, I want things to be resolved, fixed by other people. That’s what I pay them for.”

“But you don’t pay me!”

“Yes, I do! I bring home the money to pay for this place, to buy the food you make and the wine you drink. How do you think that you got the job you’re in now, huh? Because you’re the most qualified candidate, I’m sure *that’s* what you think!”

“Stop lying about everything, Max!”

“Your whole life is because of me, and me alone. No one would care who you are if it wasn’t for my efforts to make you a stellar talent that had a magical eye for art. You went to some second-rate art school that produces nobodies that live squalid lives. But look at this life that *I* have given you. Isn’t it just splendid? And you think that you’re *so* special. Think again brilliant genius, think again. I’m heading out, like I tried to say earlier. Do whatever you want.” He stormed out with heels pounding into the floor, his irrationality seething with each footstep. With a door slam, I was alone with his shattered phone that I had to clean up. Leaving mistakes that I always have to fix. I was trapped in a prison of my own making. He used to be kind and loving, at least I thought. Over the years, he soured, putting down his mask in favor of truth. Captured and imprisoned, I was his. I wanted to escape that life centered around money and ignorance, but I failed.

After he left, I laid down across the floor, feeling the rigid boards relax the tension within my shoulders. Our fights and enduring strife wove my body into knotted rope. Usually there is a burning sensation throughout my muscles, squeezing me into a ball of nervous misery. Anxiety rises, thoughts race, breaths quicken. Then gasping followed by chest pains that resemble a heart

attack. That is the cycle, so I lay down strewn across the floorboards hoping to pass it quickly. Hands over mouth and nose help with the empty shallow breaths by increasing carbon dioxide. At least the doctor told me that when I rushed to the emergency room the first time it happened.

The taupe room with the sound of crinkling exam table paper flooded my mind. The lights seemed to flicker and were hazy, but the doctor reassured me that they were not. His face delivered the news straight, that there was no heart problem, but a panic attack induced by tremendous stress. He asked about the stressors in my life, and if I could reduce any of them. Between work and existential thoughts, my husband was the first answer I gave. He stressed me, more than anything else in my life. They tried to reach him since he was listed as my emergency contact, but he failed to pick up the phone. I was alone, thinking that I would die. The doctor looked down at his clipboard with a sorrowful demeanor. He must have seen this before, husbands absent during spousal emergencies, time after time. He was an older man, probably close to retirement, with white hair that resembled a jagged icecap. Setting his clipboard down on the table behind him, he turned to me and held my hands. “When I was young, I didn’t understand what women were describing when they came in here. They would talk about anxiety and have these panic attacks for what I thought was no apparent reason. But I was wrong, terribly wrong. I’m sorry...that this happened to you too. I hope that you can find some help, someday.” Now when I lay on the floor, I remember that conversation in the exam room, painstakingly pondering his words, which only augment the pain.

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Brooding clouds lingered above, haunting the sky with their dreary presence. The wipers glided back and forth across the windscreen, gently pressing the raindrops away. I had to compartmentalize the events from last night to move forward with my life. His outbursts used to

monopolize my mind, but now they are too frequent to care about. The pain eats me from the inside out, a tree rotting from within. Everyone believes I am fine. They ask me how my day is or how I am feeling, and I never tell them the truth. It would be indecent, breaking the tacit societal code instilled in young women from early on. So, I suppress myself, my feelings to exist normally. What else can I do?

The tears trickled from the sky softly, casting the museum in a melancholic light. Ascending the steps with a black umbrella in hand, I watched the sky weigh heavily against the building. The doors opened; my footsteps echoed through the vacant halls. They all looked so still and peaceful, staring down from their perches. Everything appeared suspended in time, frozen. Without sunlight, the scene resembled a daguerreotype, hauntingly clear yet casting everything in tarnished silver. My stillness, cherished stillness, flourished this morning. You could stare at paintings, the museum, all of it and never grow tired. The grotesque real world waited outside these walls; beauty thrived within.

Thunder rumbled, shaking the floor with fervor. With no one in sight, I entered the obsidian room to see her face. She sat there with anguish, pain corrupting her innocent face. I stepped closer, admiring her mystery. Her soul seemed shattered, but resilient. I wanted to hold her and tell her everything was going to be alright, that she would be safe here. She would have a home with people to love and cherish her. But she never grows older, nor reaches freedom any more than the previous day.

“She’s perfect, isn’t she?” said a woman with long cascading silver hair that emerged from the darkness behind me. She smiled at *Celina*, both with her mouth and eyes. “From one day to the next, you never really know what you’re going to see in her. She evolves over time, whether you see it or not. *Celina* might not physically change, but your perspective does. With

more life and days behind you, she becomes someone new in your eyes. You feel compelled to help her initially. But then she grows stronger to the point where you believe that she can free herself. She's trapped right now, but you know, just *know*, that she can break free of her agony."

The woman turned her head and looked at me with loving eyes.

"You must be Ava. I wanted to meet you, see how reality compared to my imagination."

"Now you have. Am I all that you expected?" Ava held her hands behind her back, looking like she was preparing to take a bow.

"You are... a little humbler than I anticipated. I meant it as a compliment, not as—"

"It's perfectly fine. I understand, no need to explain." We heartily chuckled, laughing at my anxiety around my idol.

"Why did you leave the painting on the steps? You could have just asked us if we wanted it."

"I couldn't run the risk of you rejecting it. After all, no abandoned art can be left out in the street." She looked back at *Celina*, staring at her face with a calm demeanor. "I hope you liked *Billy* all those years ago at Angelique's show. I had to guess what he would look like as he got older, but I always imagined that he would succumb to his vices someday. He was his own worst enemy, not me." Her eyes gazed down at the floor for a moment. She turned and stared at the painting again, her lips trembling softly while she spoke. "I tried to paint her like the El Greco you saw. Her hands and body elongated help her convey confinement in my opinion. Do you like it, my swan?"

A tear rolled down my cheek as I spoke. "I love her, mom. I love her."

Ava gently reached over and held my hand, clasping it firmly with her own. “You’ve grown up so much, love. How I’ve missed you over the years. But I hope, now that you’re older, you can understand my choices more. He...just extinguished the flame within me. If I didn’t leave, I wouldn’t have set a good example for you. Can you forgive me, love?” I hugged her as tightly as I could, closing my eyes to conceal the tears streaming down my face silently. “I’m here for you now, Zarah. It’s time for me to be here, for you. You’ve lived long enough by yourself, fighting the world alone. Who do you see in *Celina*?”

I gazed deeply into *Celina*’s eyes, hoping to find something new. “Someone true, and honest. She’s hurting, yearning for something better. But she isn’t tied to conventions, trapped by norms.”

Ava rested her hand on my shoulder and spoke softly, yet confidently. “You can be free from all of this, all the pain and suffering. Please, live the life you want, regardless of society’s expectations.” She held me close, her hands warm and encouraging. “Within you, there is strength, strong enough to overcome life’s greatest challenges. You, my swan, can decide where you go, what path you choose. Whatever you decide, let it be where you want to go. I’m here for you, always.”

I was tempted to ask her questions, like why she never came back sooner or where she had been. But I didn’t care about those things. I just wanted her, the one who always cared about me. We held each other in a warm embrace, finding solace in each other.