

The Women Gallery

By Ashlee Winters

Here it comes, the large exhale of a cigar ready to cloud the biting air. The smoke sprouted from a familiar white-haired man standing at the entrance of the Vitz Art Gallery. The man makes me crave KFC every dreaded meeting. Other than a handful of chicken wings under his belt, he's only missing the glasses and goatee.

"Welcome, Mr. Luin. Glad you could make it. It wasn't too cold, I hope?" the owner of the gallery asked.

"Mr. Bonavitz. Of course I'd find you entangled in smoke," I said. "Have you gotten younger, my friend?"

"Don't pull my leg," Mr. Bonavitz huffs. "Grey windowpane. Is this a new suit?"

"Yes, I have to dress for the ladies tonight. Now, if you excuse me, it's time to greet the angels."

"You never disappoint. Enjoy yourself."

"You'll soil the painting with all that smoke. I hope it doesn't linger," I said.

I join the people and walk past two security guards. They fail to show any worry about tonight's crowd. Especially, when the third guard is in the corner chatting up a tacky red dress.

"Tsk."

The surrounding paintings didn't deserve the attention of people and spotlights. They don't resemble anything close to art. There should be a loud echo in the cemented white room of kindergarten art scraps. One piece in particular with geometrical shapes and a solid line striking through the middle of canvas makes me roll my eyes. My black dress shoes tapped at a different pace and direction.

I entered the last room of paintings in the back of the building. The beautiful women held captive in their golden frames. The lightning in the room morphs the color of their pastel skin and they hang facing the signs for the restrooms.

"Finally, the bathroom. I have to take a shit," a man nowhere near dressed for a gallery said.

"How dare you say such vulgar words in front of these women. They've had enough humiliation being in this room," I said.

"The paintings can't hear," he laughed.

"Of course, they can. They interpret us, just as we do them. They're placed in this preposterous dump and stuck listening to buffoons like you talk about their feces every day."

"Chill man, I'm just trying to go to the bathroom."

"Well, pinch your loaf and leave," I said. The man scurried into the bathroom mumbling something under his breath that I don't care to discern.

"I'm so sorry ladies. You don't deserve this. He didn't mean to wilt you with his words." I compose myself, combing a hand through my blonde hair and closing my eyes.

“Just picture the girls at home. The intoxicating paint setter. The lemon frame cleaner. The natural light making their skin glow. The lustrous eyes that follow,” I sooth. I shivered and shifted, moving my feet inward and closer together.

“I’m not supposed to touch you ladies,” I said, running my finger across the bottom of the frame. “But you don’t belong here.”

My hands pressed into the gold detailing and I lifted the ten-pound lady in an orange dress off of the wall. I moved along to the sister beside her laying nude.

“Please excuse my peeking eyes,” I said.

She was no larger than the previous woman, but the difference in the artist’s style was present. I set the woman down facing her frame to her sister, so I could help the last two misuses in the room. I copy my actions, taking them down. The woman in white and the woman standing naked with long red hair covering herself are now pressed together. Picking up the paintings, I placed them under each arm. It fits awkwardly.

I walked to the back-emergency exit, which accompanied the isolated room I was in down a small hall. The lights on the ceiling lead me to the door like a plane lining up for the take-off. My lights quickly dimmed when the man from earlier pulled the bathroom door open.

“What the,” he said.

I turned to him, kicking him in the gut and sending him back into the bathroom. The door slammed back, and I stared at the chipping paint for a second before running off.

“Hey!” he shouted.

I picked up my speed, running like Hermes, the fastest winged messenger in Greek mythology.

“When did this hallway get so long?” I panted.

“Hey, stop! Someone he’s trying to steal the paintings,” he called out, grabbing the back of the frame.

“No. Keep your filthy hands off my girls, you swine.”

I assumed his grip would slip off like a sticky hand toy I played with when I was younger, but I knew I was wrong when the paintings clattered on the ground. I had one frame in my hands and the man was on the other end of it pulling back. I let go. The man fell to the floor. He lay dormant with his hand resting on the lady’s side.

“Are you dead?” I asked.

I took a step to look at his face, his eyes were shut, and his brown hair was being painted red on the floor. I gathered the paintings messily and scuttled to the waiting exit. I burst through the door and jogged a few blocks away from the building, the cold air scratching at my lungs for release.

“I’m terribly sorry for dropping you girls. I’ll give you all a nice cleaning once we’re home. It’s a bit nippy out, so cuddle in close.”

End