

The Examination

In the examination room of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Simon Kaiser watched in silence as the spider crawled along the baseboard of the wall. It didn't look like anything at all- a vague black speck inching along the chipped paint- but it sparked a strange curiosity in Simon. *How was it that they squeezed through those slivers of darkness?* he wondered, as the black shape dissolved into the shadowy corner. *Did they build their squalid kingdoms behind the gallery walls, whispering in the ears of the figures paralyzed in paint and golden frames? Did they wander through the empty corridors in the quiet hours, silent as thieves?*

Tapping his pen on the rim of his coffee cup, Simon glowered at his watch. "Does the man think this is Sunday brunch?" he asked, combing a hand through his scalp in annoyance, both by his colleague's tardiness and his thinning hair; just that morning, he had noticed how his forehead seemed much bigger than he remembered.

Josef Dorn, Simon's wizened colleague, gave a contemplative puff of his cigar in response, the wrinkles between his furrowed brows intricate as the spiderwebs catching the dim sunlight in the windowsill. "That's how young men are. To them, time is but air and mist."

Simon sighed, slumping into his chair, like a child who had just been told to sit in time out. He had forgotten he wasn't young anymore; the glory of his twenties felt like just a week prior, but obscured by a layer of fog.

At what point exactly does youth elude you? Simon wondered, the question seizing his awareness, insidiously drawing him down a dark tunnel of contemplation. *What particular day does one go from being young to old? The day you notice your receding hairline? The day you notice the sky is grayer, the air colder, your bones wearier? The day you realize the world isn't the same as it always has been?*

Andreas Breunig rushed through the door and threw his briefcase onto his chair. He ran a hand through his flaxen hair until it was charmingly tousled, an image of effortless grace. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said with a bashful smile, his boyish face flushed with alacrity. "My bus had a flat tire. I had to walk the rest of the way here. What luck, huh! I hope I didn't miss anything."

"We were just getting started," Simon said, not meeting Andreas' eye as he laid out the documents on the table, checking his watch. "The first one won't be for another three minutes."

Andreas nodded, smiling all the while, but it was the kind of smile that was required. The kind that didn't count. And thus, the three men were plunged into a palpable silence; the only sound was the ceaseless ticking of their watches and the groaning of the wood floors as Simon wriggled in his chair in a vain attempt to get comfortable.

“So,” said Andreas, unable to resist the urge to fill the void. “Kaiser, how is Carina? I saw her at the post office the other day. So she’s pregnant then!”

“We’re getting a divorce,” Simon said, his tone curt and nonchalant, as if he were reporting the weather. He shifted his position in his chair, the hard wood stiff against his back. *Why haven’t we asked for something more comfortable? We do sit in this dismal room for hours on end...*

“Oh,” Andreas said, the sound deflating from his lips like a forgotten birthday balloon. “I’m sorry,” he managed, patting Simon on the shoulder- a gesture that should have been friendly but seemed detached from any true sentiment, as if performed by a mechanical arm. Andreas toyed with his pen, clicking it in, clicking it out. “Dorn,” he said, “how’s the lung holding up?”

“It isn’t,” Josef said, smoke spilling out between his teeth.

Simon checked his watch, wondering if it was broken; the hands made sluggish progress in their circuit through the insufferable seconds. “Let’s send him in.”

“Alright then,” Andreas said, springing to his feet and marching to the door across the room, peeking his head out, the first applicant of the day following him in, black portfolio in hand.

Simon's eyes weighed on the roster. There were so many names. *Would the day ever end?* He shifted in his seat, rubbing at a knot in his neck. “Your name is Adolphus?”

“Adolf. Nice to meet you, sirs,” said the young man, greeting the three admission counselors with a firm handshake.

Simon didn't meet his gaze, eyes dancing over the small print on the roster. "Congratulations on passing the primary examination," he said. "Now, what do you have to show us?"

Adolf opened his portfolio, fumbling with the latch as if he had forgotten how his hands worked. His appearance was neat, like freshly pressed linen, with a dour, unextraordinary face, hair combed meticulously into shape. Everything about him was planned. Honed. Sculpted. But there was something uneasy in his eyes. Something dark and hidden.

He laid out his work: all watercolor landscapes, unblemished and staid, depicting dark forests in the early morning quiet, imperious German castles mounted on rocky bluffs and old city streets cluttered with the ruins of time. The colors were light and hesitant- pale daubs dubiously forming the whispering shapes.

"A bit safe, no?" Simon said, passing the paintings to his colleagues, moving from one picture to the next in a hasty assembly line.

"It's what I like," Adolf said.

"You paint trees," Josef said, the phantoms of Goethe and Friedrich dancing with the swirling smoke of his cigar. "But it all seems very dead. Where is the majesty of nature? Where is the storm and the wind? Where is the *muse*, boy?"

Adolf blanched, eyes wide and glossy as pearls. "I like calm scenes sir... Why must German art be only storms and wild seas?"

"I think we've seen enough," Simon said with a thin smile, pushing away Adolf's paintings, much like how one would push away an empty dinner plate, ready for the

next course. “You don’t have the proper skills for admittance. Your paintings are vague. Unadventurous. Typical. They’re of no artistic value.” Simon lifted his shoulders in a wry shrug. “At best, you could sell them as a decoration in a coffee shop.”

“Although,” Andreas intervened, raising a finger for emphasis, “Adolf, I would consider applying to our school of architecture. Your drawings- this courtyard for example- are skillfully drawn.”

“No,” said Adolf, a line slowly forming between his brows, the reality of the rejection materializing in his expression: pallid cheeks, wobbling mouth, eyes averted to the floor. “I don’t think I will.” He gathered his work, his movements jerking and hasty, much like Josef Dorn’s summer storms. Unable to suppress the moment’s hot emotions, Adolf muttered, “You are making a grave mistake.”

Simon snorted. He rubbed his empty stomach, remembering he hadn’t eaten breakfast. *I should be losing weight anyway.* “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Adolf said, holding his portfolio firmly to his chest. “Good day, sirs.” Spinning on his heel, he marched out of the room; the only sound was his echoing footsteps and the curt slamming of the door.

Simon shook his head, his smile sardonic as he glanced down at the name on the roster. “Blessed will be the day when the name Adolphus Hitler echoes in the halls of the Louvre!

“You were much too harsh,” Andreas said, looking defeated, tucking a perfect lock of golden hair behind his perfectly round ear with a perfectly tragic frown.

“There’s no denying what is good art and what is bad,” Josef said, smashing out his cigar in the mounting pile of ash in the tray. “That is the plague of this century: it births mechanical men who live mechanical lives that create mechanical, worthless art.”

Simon looked at his hands clasped before him, the fingernails bitten down, ink and graphite embedded between the fine wrinkles. He closed his eyes, and for a moment, he heard the light scampering of phantom spiders as they crawled in their secret dungeons behind walls, all but tangles of black legs and beady eyes, sniffing the dread in the air amongst the whirling ashes of Josef Dorn’s cigar.