

about 1400 words

LACMA

The white face mooned down at her, reflecting brilliant light into her non-reflective lenses.

"Where's the Vermeers?" asked ruby lips between pale parenthesis.

Their skin was so weak. Their traps were mines that we fell into during sweating nights in dark eastern lands. Keisha pushed her glasses up with her thumb, wincing when her new nail dug into the bridge of her nose. She dabbed, then looked at her finger. No blood.

"Hello?" Vermeer said with a little more vehemence. He looked at her as if annoyance were glasses allowing him to see a person for the first time.

"Yes, the Vermeers are on three with the other European masters," she said.

"Master," she thought. There's an appropriate term for Europeans. They loved to be called master.

Get over it. Her boyfriend, soon to be ex, said that last week. Paine Webber capitalism whitewashed Hi's brain. Just because he made more than she did, he was happy to Uncle-Tom it up. It had been 25 years since desegregation, so she really should let that 400 years of lynching, whipping, rape, and disenfranchisement go.

Horns were growing out of Vermeer's head as he ogled a Monet. The red-arrow tail stuck through the rear of his Dockers. She could only see his accoutrements when he turned around and crouched under the fluorescents. He turned and she forced a neutral look to replace her moments-old disgust.

"Where's the elevator?"

She pointed straight ahead, just as a quiet, white ding sounded.

She always felt that the second floor African exhibit should have a lion's roar, not that dinky, white ding. She almost told Mr. Chow about that, but he was dingier than Vermeer.

Integration of the Asian culture flowed downhill like melting snow in the Rockies. They made Manga, which was short for Many Asians Now Gotta be American. Those cartoons had huge blue eyes, multi-colored hair, and even before the animation they were obsessed with women having nearly translucent skin. Making women white before they even knew who Marco Polo was.

Jeremy appeared then, trading spots with Courtnee. His suit always looked pressed and his shoes shone like waxed ebony. He wore a white shirt that also looked and smelled fresh as lilacs on a sunny afternoon. Keisha had never been in a meadow, but she dreamed of Surat meadows with Jeremy doing African mating dances in those beautiful and very disproportionate sculptures' poses.

She melded into the blank walls, not even as black as the faint smudges from certain soles. People read the sanitary cards that biased your eyes by washing your mind.

All the sanitary-ness was blinding. White devouring the colors except for the brilliant pictures. She went and bought a one hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy from a AAA agent that night.

"What about my unborn son?" Keisha asked.

"No ma'am," the agent replied with almost neutral annoyance.

Why did these people ask such stupid shit, the agent thought, then replied, "It must be a person or persons currently in existence."

He'd started saying "in existence" after being reprimanded for arguing with a nerd about whether Batman was alive.

"I'm like one of those artists now," Keisha mused.

"Ma'am?" The agent replied. He wanted this conversation over, pronto. It was February twenty-eighth and his quota was short by two policies. That would be okay as AAA was fairly lenient, but when Tony played back the recorded-for-better-customer-service call in the March meeting on Tuesday, he did not want to be the example of who failed to do his damndest to close those last two deals.

"Artists, their paintings..." she trailed off.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What's your name?"

"Jeremy," he replied.

"Jeremy! That's who I want to leave it to."

"Yes, ma'am. Last name?"

"Just Jeremy," Keisha said defensively. "Jeremy from LACMA."

"Is Lacma his last name?" Jeremy asked patiently, already knowing the answer, but hoping against odds.

"I'm not sure," Keisha said.

"You don't know this person's full name, do you?"

Silence cradled the line. "Ma'am?"

"What else do you need?"

Jeremy read down the asterisked lines on his form.

"I need the beneficiary's last name, middle if he has one, address, email, and phone number."

God, how did people like this not get run over crossing the street? He was not really thrown by the lack of personal info. Many lifers rarely understood what they were doing with a chunk of dollars few people ever amassed. Fraud was his company's concern. That, and identifying the correct person so as not to incur a lawsuit from every joker named Jeremy.

"Okay, who do you want to list as beneficiary till you get the guy's name and essentials sorted?" Jeremy asked.

"What about LACMA?" Keisha said, grinning.

"Who is Lacma? Does he have a last name?" Jeremy said.

"No silly! It's the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. L-A-C-M-A."

A charity. Always a dangerous beneficiary because someone inevitably came out of the woodwork to challenge such a bequest.

"You sure?" Jeremy queried. "Don't you have friends or family to leave it to?"

"Yes, Jeremy, but you insist on having his full name and other essentials," said Keisha.

The hard floor inched up her legs. She watched the patrons mill about, most putting their index fingers on their chins to look like they were thinking, but their soft minds were blank canvases.

Why had she put LACMA down two days ago? It gave her a job, but that job felt like servitude to whites and Asians. Not many blacks came by. She looked around the room and counted five African Americans among the forty people. She decided to keep a running count for the day. More than half the staff was black, again, like a plantation where all the whites were masters and blacks did the work.

She got Kendrick to come over and he switched teams. She would never bring another fiancé here, or maybe she'd bring them all here to test their loyalty. What was this thing with black men and white girls?

Anger plummeted into her feet. They began to tingle. A white woman with bangles on her ears and fake blond hair sauntered up. Keisha stared at her, willing her feet to remain planted.

"Hey, where's the guy with the ear's stuff?" She bellowed in a raspy voice. Keisha sneezed. "Oh goodness!" The blond screeched, then scurried away, her flat ass barely moving to her tiny steps.

How could he like that? The girl did have good taste in clothes, but with enough money, Keisha would still look more stylish and have ass.

Jeremy stood in his favorite spot, the northwest corner of the German Expressionist exhibit. Germans were the only Europeans Keisha respected. They hated Jews, but at least they got it over with.

American whites hated blacks, but dragged the torture out. Maybe Jeremy was German.

"German?" Keisha said.

Jeremy nodded then went back to eyeing patrons for stray hands and tongues. Yes, some wanted to say they'd licked a masterpiece.

"Are you German?" Keisha managed three words this time.

"American." He pointed at his mouth, "No accent."

"Heritage. What is your last name?" Keisha said.

"Spencer."

"Middle name?"

Jeremy turned, giving her his full attention momentarily. "Aren't you supposed to be watching Kandinsky?"

"No, confirming tickets, but this is my fifteen." She punched something into her phone.

He turned back to the paintings, then walked quickly (never run or trot unless it's an undeniable emergency) toward a dowdy man who squinted at *The Orator*, a highly charged piece that no sane person could have hung in their living room.

That's how Keisha judged most art: could I have it hanging in my apartment? She loved the African masks and had many from the stores in Little Ethiopia lining her walls, except not in the bedroom. She could not have faces watching her sleep. *The Orator*, although immediate and powerful, was way too much, at least that's what she'd overheard a patron saying and it sounded right to her. Good to take out for a conversation piece at a party, but no good day-to-day.

She called her life insurance Jeremy again that afternoon.

"Can I cancel my policy?"

"Sure, can I ask why?" Jeremy said. He didn't care much since he'd met his quota. The cancellation would not take effect until the end of March.

She pulled her favorite wooden mask with the small lips off its place above the others. She ran her finger over rough, wide nostrils.

"Good-bye, Jeremy."

She clicked end.