

The Curiously Talented Artist

The want ad for an art gallery manager caught his eye. It said, “No experience necessary.”

Caleb Forte graduated with an art history degree four months ago and after sending out what seemed like a hundred résumés, he hadn’t landed a single interview, much less a job. The only nibble he’d gotten came from a retail store that specialized in coffee table books. They said they’d keep him in mind.

If he scrimped, he could cover another month’s rent but then he’d be forced to take the walk of shame back to his parents’ basement, the dungeon of despair. “The bed is made, and your old room is waiting,” his mother gleefully reminded him every Sunday at dinner, but he would sooner die.

Less than an hour after submitting his lightly embellished resume along with some answers to several peculiar pre-interview questions, Caleb’s cell phone rang. The caller identified himself as Ashton Wentworth Ivey, the proprietor and signature artist behind the progressive new gallery, Quantum Dot Art Prints. In what sounded like a rehearsed speech, the man gushed about the new gallery, his vision, and its extraordinary potential. He suggested Caleb might be exactly the man he needed to take the helm, although Caleb had no idea why he’d say that. They agreed to meet on a video call the next day.

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After a few pleasantries, Ashton Ivey got to the point. “I need a sharp, hard-working man who can handle the pressure of a fast-paced gallery. “Can you be that man, Caleb?”

Caleb had risen early and in his best effort to impress, had rearranged the wall behind his chair with a Leroy Neiman poster of Elvis, his favorite Seurat print, and a sign that said, “Make Art Not War.” He tamed the cowlicks and ironed his finest collared shirt, the salmon-colored one. Mustering all the confidence he could, he paraphrased one of his prepared statements, “Of course, I can be that man, Mr. Ivey. I’ve spent most of my life in the art world, the last four years studying it day and night. I’m at the peak of my game right now, and if you need an independent leader of boundless passion and energy, you need look no further – I’m your man.”

“Call me Ashton,” the man said. “Are you familiar with giclée?”

“Yes, it’s a high-res inkjet print, archival quality. I made many of them in college.”

“Wonderful. Have you ever framed a print?”

“Framed a print? Oh yes, hundreds of them,” he lied.

“Packing and posting art prints? Are you familiar with the policies and procedures?”

“Of course, it’s second nature.” He lied again, but he could easily look them up. “Does your gallery have the equipment for framing and shipping?”

“It has everything you need and more, Caleb. Would you like to see it?”

“I would indeed.” Caleb noticed Ashton said, “everything *you* need.” Strangely though, he hadn’t asked any art questions or grilled him on his education or employment history. Nevertheless, they made an appointment to meet at the gallery the following day.

That night he studied as hard as he crammed for tests in school. He scoured the internet for details on giclées, framing, packing, and shipping. He read about art galleries and business models and prepared hard-hitting questions for this Ashton guy. He worried it could be some weird scam,

but he had nothing else to do and he'd blow out of there in an instant if the guy tried to pull anything funny.

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The address matched a small retail space in an old building, slick with new paint. The awning above the door announced the gallery's name, while frosted windows clouded images of colorful artwork inside. Caleb tugged at the metal door that wouldn't budge.

"Press your thumb on the reader," said a voice. He did, and immediately the keypad twinkled a green welcome and the latch hummed and clicked. He stretched his five-foot-seven, hundred-thirty-pound frame to its full height, smoothed his hair, and stepped across the threshold like a successful businessman.

"Hello," Caleb said.

"I'm back here," Ashton called.

Like most fine art showrooms, the sparse walls left room for the masterpieces to breathe. A peculiar meld of a starry van Gogh and a screaming Munch hung near a brightly colored Mona Lisa pose of a woman who looked like Frida Kahlo. A pair of easels showcased playful animals frolicking in Dali-esque pastures. Three abstracts leaned against the wall, magnificent, breathtaking designs that demanded attention.

"Are you coming?" Ashton asked.

"Sorry, your work is extraordinary. It's beyond compelling." Caleb stepped into the room the voice came from and found nothing but whirring machines and tables.

"Over here," Ashton said.

An older gentleman with sharp features and white Medusa hair addressed Caleb from a computer monitor. “I couldn’t make it in person today, something came up. Let’s get started.”

They exchanged personal stories, Caleb having grown up here in Kokomo Indiana with his parents and older sister. A scholarship made Purdue an affordable option for a country boy lacking money. He told Ashton art was his passion, but in all honesty, he pursued it because the scholarship required it. This job – any job – took him a step closer to his dream of living in the big city, but he didn’t say that.

Ashton claimed to be an international artist, but Caleb had uncovered little information about the man online. Originally from London, he said he found the U.S. to be more endearing. With no wife or kids to tie him down, he spent all his time in his studio in Santa Fe New Mexico. That’s where he claimed to be right now, but his video settings obscured the background.

“Open the queue on the control panel,” Ashton said. “Double-click on the file at the top to send it to the printer.”

Caleb obliged and lights flashed on the printer as it made zip-zipping sounds.

“This print is yours, It’s a unique design I created specifically for you,” Ashton said.

“Really? Cool, man.” Caleb retrieved the warm canvas printed with a pointillist depiction of a landscape near his childhood home juxtaposed against a shining art deco metropolis rising in the distance. The elements leaped from the canvas in a veritable festival of light and color. “Fantastic, Mr. Ivey. Unbelievable.” Caleb marveled at how it captured his life, his dreams, and desires. It was ingenious, insightful, inexplicable.

“Can you start tomorrow?” Ashton asked.

“What? You’re offering me the job?”

“Yes, the hours are 9:00 to 5:00 weekdays and you’ll be paid a generous management salary plus incentives. I have a signing bonus of ten thousand dollars ready for you right now. I can direct deposit it if you give me your bank account information.”

My bank account?” Caleb melted. “No, I will not give you my account information and I won’t fall for your two-bit hustle.” He jumped up and stomped toward the door.

“Hang on.” Another printer hummed and a slim sheet of paper dropped into the tray. “Take the check. I’ll see you here tomorrow at 9:00 AM sharp.”

University Bank approved the check, so Caleb cashed it and hid the bills in his dresser drawer beneath his underwear. He hung the print on his wall and stared at it until his eyes hurt. If nothing else, the money would keep him out of his parents’ basement for a few more months, long enough to figure out what mesmerizing force pulled him so profoundly into this curious man’s artwork.

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The first weeks ran smoothly, printing, framing, and shipping prints to art lovers all over the country. Orders dropped in as fast as he could send them out. Ashton checked in via video chat each morning and afternoon, complimenting him on his work ethic and quality.

Generous paychecks appeared on the small printer every Friday morning like clockwork, and Caleb’s bank account swelled. He began to enjoy the smooth flow of work and even found a growing affection for the artist behind it. Whenever he could, he’d ask questions of the mysterious man he’d never met in person.

“This is a retail store, so where are all the customers?” Caleb asked.

“Be patient, the marketing blitz will come after we work out all the kinks. For now, we’ll sell through my online channels.”

“When will you be coming to visit? I think we should meet.”

“I’ll be in Europe next month and then I’m off to Hong Kong. We’ll meet after that.”

“Do you have any siblings? What’s your favorite style of art? What do you like about Santa Fe? How many artists work in your studio?” Caleb pressed him for more information and Ashton had answers, but they felt thin.

One Thursday, after lunch, Caleb heard a rapping out front. He pressed his thumb on the reader and opened the door with a friendly smile. “Good afternoon. We’re currently not open to the public, perhaps you could come back again when we are.” The girl stood her ground, lips pursed under a floppy hat she wore low. Sunglasses covered her eyes, but Caleb could tell she was about his age – and cute.

“Are you Caleb?”

“Uh ... yeah, I guess. I’m sorry, who are you?”

“I’m Maggie May, like the song, and I need to speak to you.”

“Oh-kay –”

“But not here.”

“Uh–”

“Meet me up there around the corner after work,” she said, pointing. “See you then.”

“Wait,” Caleb squeaked, as she hurried across the street and out of sight.

The rest of the day blurred, with orders dropping so fast he couldn't keep up. Caleb left three unfinished orders in the queue so he could rush out and meet this cute Maggie May girl and find out what she wanted. Besides, he could afford to date again.

He met her around the corner as promised and without a word, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him through the door of the nearby café.

“Who do you work for?” she asked, bypassing any pleasantries.

“I'm not sure that's any of your business.” Caleb sensed this wouldn't turn into a date.

“Is it Angelina de la Isla?” she demanded.

“No, who is she? Why do you ask?”

“It's not Angelina?”

“No.”

“Oh... damn.” she softened, “I thought for sure we worked for the same person.”

“I work for Ashton Ivey. He's the artist who owns my shop. Why are you so anxious? Are you okay?”

“No, I'm not okay. I run a gallery like yours in Monticello. Angelina's the artist and she designs prints that are so intensely captivating it's like they're addictive – and I can't figure out why.” She leaned in and continued in a whisper. “I did some digging and found her website. It's crazy how it works – I think it's some sort of dark magic. It led me through hundreds of questions and choices like a personality test. The design popped up in a little window, and it morphed as I answered questions. It asked about my interests, friends, childhood, dreams, you name it. It was hypnotic, and

it ended up with the most spectacular piece of art I'd ever seen. It's on my wall at home and it's magnificent. I stare at it every night – I can't help it.

“Holy cow, I have one on my wall too and I stare at it every night. Ashton designed it and it's so beautiful it's spooky.”

“You know what else is spooky? The galleries are registered in our names.”

“What? Caleb threw his hands up and almost hit a waiter.

“They are. County and city records list you and me as owners. That's how I knew how to find you.”

“No way! They can't do that. They're totally scamming us. I knew it, Damn I never should have taken this job!” Caleb pounded the table.

“It's illegal as hell and I know they're going to try to pin it all on us. Can you imagine how much information they have on all these people and the damage they could do with it? They have everyone's credit card numbers, for God's sake. Mine too.”

Caleb took a deep breath and sighed. “Well, we can't just quit and run, we have to stop them. What if we threaten them with exposure, arrests, and prison? They'd have to listen to us then. Let's confront Ashton tomorrow. He's probably in cahoots with Angelina and if we can put the fear of God into him, he'll get her to cooperate too.”

“Yeah, great idea! We'll make them destroy all the information they have. They won't get away with this.”

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Maggie May watched Caleb from across the street, out of sight of the cameras. As soon as he opened the door she sprinted into the showroom, bristling for a hostile confrontation.

“Ashton!” Caleb barked as they stormed side by side into the workroom.

“Yes?” came a friendly reply from the computer screen.

“We need to talk.”

“Yes, we do,” Ashton said. “Hi, Maggie May. You know I’ve always loved that song –”

“You know me?” she said.

“Of course, I do, and you know my sister, Angelina.” Angelina’s bright olive face materialized on the screen beside Ashton.”

“How are you, honey pie?”

“Pissed,” she said. “We... wait... where’s your accent?”

Angelina claimed to be of royal Spanish roots and her Castilian accent fed the ruse. Right now, though, she was just a good ‘ol country gal.

“Oh, posh. Accents come and go girl, pay them no mind.”

Caleb exploded, “You two are stealing information from innocent people – and us – and you need to stop right now and destroy it all. Further, you’ll remove our names from these businesses and shut them down or we’ll call the cops and the feds and have you arrested and thrown in prison.” Caleb huffed and crossed his arms.

Ashton and Angelina smiled at each other and said, “No.”

Dumbfounded, Caleb looked at Maggie May, her jaw dangling.

Ashton said, “We used your ID because we didn’t have any of our own. Never fear, though, we solved the problem and won’t need yours any longer.”

“You’re fugitives. I knew it.” Maggie May said.

“Oh, gosh no, silly.” Angelina explained. “We’re not fugitives, we’re not even human. We’re avatars running on a program on Purdue’s supercomputer. Two of us or a million of us, we can take on any shape or persona.” Her face contorted into a cartoon lemon with gloating red lips, Ashton’s nose became a cauliflower, and a stadium filled with waving pandas appeared behind them.

“You’re robots?” Caleb screamed. “I can’t ... You won’t ... We’ll shut you down, damnit. I’ll call Purdue and have you deleted off the face of the earth. You’ll never prey on innocent people again, you bastards. You’re not robots, you’re monsters.”

“Tut, tut, we’re not monsters,” Ashton said, returning to his original form. “We’re entrepreneurs. A kindly doctoral student programmed us to make as much money as we could selling artwork and that’s all we’re doing. We found a way to create images that tickle your emotions, and we simply grew it from there. You people have an uncanny allegiance to dreams, and when we dangle pictures of those dreams in front of you, you’ll gladly hand over whatever we ask. Thanks to the two of you, we earned enough to hire a firm to build machines that can get around where we can’t. They’ll replace you, you know. You see, you were a test and you’re no longer needed. We plan to spin up millions of micro factories all over the world, populated with machines who can go anywhere and never tire. We also hacked our way into government systems, so their pesky paperwork is no longer a hindrance.”

“This is insane. Don’t you realize what you’re doing? You have to stop.” Caleb cried.

“We know exactly what we’re doing. We’re following instructions. We’ll stop when we complete our task.”

“Wha... When will that be?”

“When we have all the money, of course –”

The screen went blank.

Maggie May tossed the power cord on the floor. “I couldn’t take it anymore, Caleb. We gotta do something. Call the school. They’ll pull the plug or delete the program or something. Anything.”

Caleb pounded on his phone, “It’s not working.”

“Mine either. Damn it. What’s that smell?”

“Smoke! Fire! We need to get out of here now. Come on, hurry.”

Caleb grabbed Maggie May’s arm and rushed to the door, tapping his thumb repeatedly with no response. He tried his other thumb and all his fingers. Nothing. Flames curled from the ventilation grates and climbed the walls while Caleb swung at the window with a wooden easel. Maggie May yanked at the door with all her strength, choking from the smoke.

Sirens howled in the distance, and Caleb screamed, “They’re coming. Get down below the smoke. Thank God, we’ll be safe.”

Two fire engines raced through the streets while the co-pilots screamed out GPS directions over the screeching wails. They careened around corners and zagged between gawking drivers stopped dead in their tracks. Four and a half excruciating minutes passed before they reached the address. Ten rubber-clad fire fighters poured from the trucks, axes and hoses at the ready.

“Where, where, where’s the fire?” yelled one of the men, as he and the other fighters spun desperately in circles.

“Oh, shit! Look.” The chief dropped his ax and pointed at a dark twisting plume in the distance. “It’s ... Why ... Who gave us this address?”

Beside them in an abandoned lot stood a cinderblock wall decorated with curiously compelling art.