

The Empty

“Is it authentic?” The man rose an inquisitive brow, warm chestnut eyes searching Day’s for a crack in composure; some sign that she was fooling him.

“I mean, I have to ask. A statue like this? For forty dollars? I would’ve asked for loads more, kid, just saying.”

Day says nothing, breathing in bitter autumn air as it blew through the yard. Standing here, it almost felt as if her body was sinking into the dead grass, becoming nothing but a mound of flesh to fertilize the land.

“It’s got good shine, for its age,” the man continues, eyes shining in unabashed excitement. His moustache wiggled as he talked and she wondered if it felt like the shifting of pine needles, as it sounded.

Disgust tore through her stomach, her resilience ebbing away with each second. The brilliance in his joy could have blinded her.

This is good, she tells herself, forcing a small smile.

“Forty,” she repeats, voice hoarse. She needed this money.

“You sick, kid? That’s too bad. This weather is awful.”

She blinks at him. Again, she felt herself melt into the grass.

“Oh, yes, sorry. Forty it is.” He smiles and the pine needles come down over his chapped lips.

Pain rises up her throat, constricting every muscle, every tissue, every cell. She wished she were sick.

He pats his pockets blindly, then grunts. “I forgot my wallet in the van. I’ll be back in a minute.” He raises a finger in the air as if to freeze her in place, nerves wrinkling his face. He had no reason to worry; they were the only ones on the street.

“Yes.” She forces a smile; one she imagined a fifteen-year-old girl should be able to manage any day.

After watching the man cut through the thick fog that suffocated the avenue—as well as her helpless garage sale sign—her eyes slid to the statue.

It was a small thing. A woman holding a bird in her arms, both of their forms made delicately through what must have been hours of carving the wood and then coating it in a smooth gloss.

Its home used to be in the living room, nestled between two adventure novels. There was no need for it now.

Without thinking, she picks it up gently and pushes it lovingly into her chest, resting her chin atop the woman's head in a kind farewell. The tender hug lasts a long moment, until she notices the man making his way back and she jolts, dropping it—as if caught committing a crime. The thump of it against the table slams into her ears, proof of her fragility.

“Here.” Panting, the man places the sheets of money in her hand, looking down at the statue expectantly.

After hesitating, she sets the money down and lifts the woman up in the air for him to snatch. The invisible tether attaching her and the statue is viciously cut as he takes it. Not precise, like a surgeon's entry into the body but torn as an injured ligament—painful and jagged. She feels her heart constrict.

“Thank you. My daughter will love this,” he says. “She's about your age. Her sixteenth is next week.”

Any idea of a complete sentence melts on her tongue, and all she manages to spew out is a curt, “Okay.”

She watches his polished van disappear, then speed-walks back into the house, tears already threatening to spill down her cheeks. Each step is lethargic, her shoulders starting to droop like palm trees in a hurricane.

Once she's inside, a stifled sob bursts out of her in an ugly imitation of a rubber ball being squished under a car. Without sparing it even a furtive glance, she shoves the cash into the jar marked ‘Dad's funeral’—written hastily in black permanent marker.

She collapses on the floor of her father's room, her fingers trying to grip onto the carpet—find something solid to hold as her world floats around her in a sea of smudged greys. The world knew colour, but she did not. Not anymore.

“Dad,” she says, weakly, eyes scanning the emptied room. The word sounds foreign; she hasn't used it in so long. She never thought that word, of all words, would expire. That a word could taste so stale on her tongue despite being formed with love her whole life.

She curls up in the center of the room, hugging her knees to her chest. The walls were now stricken bare, the furniture gone, all parts of her father scrubbed away with each sale she made. The emptiness was palpable.

The walls, though having always been bare, strike her with its whiteness—as if they'd become swirls of milk.

She sits there—in the empty—for hours, waiting for some kind of fulfillment. For her father's life to flood back into the room and erase the stagnancy of the moment.

Like a phantom, her mother drifts in by the doorway, surveying the room for a quiet moment.

“The daughter will love her gift,” she says, and although her voice trembles, her stare hardens with resolve.

Her mother sinks down next to her.

Joining her in the empty.