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The Last Met Ball

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Isabelle Blank

The Last Met Ball

The idea began first to be spoken of in whispers throughout the museum. Murmured of in faint tones; in quiet wings. Whispered about by yellowing oil paintings in the European wing, muffled voices echoing in the museum's hushed night. Nobody knew who thought of the idea. It was as if the idea had grown out of the paintings themselves. Between layers of impasto, the idea spread its seed to set more roots throughout the museum, to the ceramics downstairs, on the marble of the Roman statuary. It spread like ivy across the frescos, wheedled its way into the embroideries. A week passed, and the idea took full bloom across the canvases on every wall, it became concrete. The party was to occur, the Curators sanctioned it.

Rose

It was the day before the ball. The other girls skipped their chores and snuck to look at the catalogues set up on the Curators' tables to select their dresses from the archives. I still hadn't rifled through the catalogues' pages. My mind was elsewhere, I felt on edge, my muscles tight, my mind spacey. The ball seemed to me a waste of time, of resources. My father, however, saw it as the perfect means for escape.

"Why haven't you gone down to look at the catalogues?" My father was packing dried fruit into a nylon pouch. He had been saving our rations for weeks, putting a little away at a time, lying the fruit out on a tarp downstairs in the atrium. The atrium was one of the few places where the windows were left untarred and weak sunlight was allowed to shine through. The windows of the atrium looked out on what used to be Central Park, but the yellow air had suffocated the trees and grass. Central Park appeared now as a wild, ravaged wilderness, choked stiff and black through the atrium's windows. Sinister and mangled, the landscape was

drastically altered from the park of my childhood. I would soon be out there – either moving freely away from the rot, or blackened and hardened as a part the landscape.

I shrugged, “Hadn’t planned on going to the ball.” I kneeled down to the wrinkled tarp to help gather the fruit leather and put it into the bag. I held the ends of the bag taut as my father zipped the bag. “Thought you would need help with, you know, the preparations.” I motioned to our cots, tucked in a corner amidst glass cases of ancient and intricately carved musical instruments. To the untrained eye, our belongings seemed merely to be well organized, but we had been setting up for weeks, working systematically. We were ready to grab and go when the moment arose. Tucked under blankets were food rations to sustain us. Extra clothes were stuffed into our pillow cases. We had no idea what the climate would be like outside the museum’s walls. On the outside.

“I think we’re prepared, Rose, you should go. Go dance, enjoy yourself. Don’t know when you’ll get that opportunity again. For God’s sake, go down and look at the catalogues.” My father shooed me out of the room. I wandered through the galleries before treading downstairs. As I passed through the galleries and neared the open staircase leading down to the first floor, I could already hear the bustle below. People chattered as they carted lanterns up from the basement. The air was filled with the crinkle of colored paper and the squeals of children running around on the slippery floor. Some of the musicians were carting instruments up from the archives, and two of the dancers helped a sculptor lug a grand piano down from our quarters.

I inched past the chaos and into the Roman and Greek Wing, the Curators’ quarters. The catalogues, kept glossy and pristine in drawers from the archives below, were set out for us to select fantastic garments from the museum’s collections to wear to the party. The Curators usually went unseen by the rest of the compound. Five of the Old City museum’s top researchers

and the founders of the compound, they chose to remain in the secluded upper level of the Greek wing and preside over the goings-on from the Southwest balcony. Now the Curators sat like ravens, presiding over the catalogues fanned across the surface of the table. I rifled through a couple of catalogues of past exhibits at the costume institute. There was only one female Curator, she sat in the middle of the table, giving me a stern look through tiny half moon glasses suspended on her beak notes. I noticed a tiny spider-web crack in the glass of her spectacles. She spoke with a tremulous voice “Haven’t reserved one yet?” She addressed me directly, the first time a Curator had ever done so – perhaps she didn’t recognize me as a daughter of one of the Escaped.

I shook my head, “Just haven’t had time, ma’am, with my chores and all.”

The Curator shook her head, the other four flanked her on either side, stoic, looking out severely into the bustling Great Hall. “There’s plenty down there, just don’t know what, you’re coming in a little late.” She rose, brushing her pants clear of minute dust particles, gathering two or three books in her arms. “You’re one of the last – but we’ll find something.”

I followed her into the Great Hall, and down the drafty staircases, whose stairs became narrower and dirtier with each flight. The Curator set her hand on the vault door to the costume archives, and turned back around, hand on the knob to look me over once. I caught something like pity – or disgust, cross her features before they hardened once again, birdlike. I had no doubt now that she recognized whose daughter I was. The Curator, of a slight frame and seemingly no strength, yanked open the heavy metal door to reveal rows of garments shimmering under cellophane coverings. My mother had made me a tutu once in this compound of that very discarded cellophane.

The Curator stood in the doorway and watched me unblinkingly as I walked down the many rows. There was a white scalloped fringe trimmed dress, a candy striped dress from the thirties with a wide pink belt, a frothy pale pink lace tiered dress, a silver flapper dress with gossamer sleeves and tassels at the hem. I spied a hot pink two-piece floor length column dress, a velvet dressing gown, a pale green and white striped Rococo dress with a train that began in between the shoulder blades and trailed beyond the hoop skirt, a mini dress covered entirely in pale blue feathers. Rows and rows of this finery, all sealed up in cellophane, levels beneath us as we kicked around in our decades-old repurposed denim and t-shirts. All this history, locked in a basement beneath us.

It hadn't always been like this. My mother wore magnificent clothes. A closet full of slippery silver silks and black wool for galas and premieres. In the Old City, she was the prima ballerina of a company famous world-wide. She spoke on radio shows, when there was such a thing, was interviewed for documentaries, attended grand balls. Grand balls of which a sad counterfeit was to occur tonight. For those who hadn't known the Old City – or for those who had forgotten, the prospect must have seemed magical – a grand party thrown in the Great Hall. But for those of us who remembered the Old City, this upcoming party seemed only to remind us of what we lost in the disaster. I was only five when we came here, but the memories I retained from that Old City were as bright and vibrant as the oil paintings upstairs. The Old City was made fuzzy and more brilliant in my mind with time, like Toulouse's scenes of Paris nightlife, like Monet's hazy pastel sunsets. The memory of my mother, however, never grew hazy, she remained as tangible as Degas' dark sculptures.

All those wonderful clothes, left behind in the apartment. The irony was her clothes could have been stored in the museum's archive, they were just as magnificent as the rest. How I wished I could have selected something of hers to wear for the party rather than don an anonymous garment. I used to sit on her bed, watching her get ready while the city whirled beneath our apartment. Every time I watched her button the bodice of her costume backstage, she looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and said "Someday." But I never would take the stage at the now derelict Metropolitan Opera House.

Someday. It was something my father and I repeated to each other in the wake of her escape. It began as Any Day. Any Day we'd get a covert message from her. In those early days I saw her in my mind's eye flitting through the dead landscape, vibrant as the butterfly she played in the Nutcracker – making her escape to a better place untouched by the toxicity. Any Day morphed into Someday. Someday we'd also escape, my father and I. I could no longer conjure the image of her in those beautiful stage wings, dancing through the landscape. I began to see her body, stiff and blackened, lifeless in the outside world. A dancer unmoving. Now, seventeen years later, we had finally given up hope. We didn't know if we'd find her. But Someday had come. For whatever that meant.

The Curator clapped briskly and I knew I had to make my decision – I had wandered for too long through the rows. I knew it the minute I saw it. Tucked behind an intricately pleated burgundy gown was a simple drop-waist black sheath, glinting subtly with jet beads. I thought of my mother dancing the role of Swan Lake's Odile. Clad in sparkling black, she leapt across the stage in my mind's eye. I called the Curator over. "I've decided."

She nodded and removed the dress from its hanging, laying it in its cellophane in my hands. I was ushered up the stairs. The Curator led me back to the desk, “Now I’ve got to register your dress, and you’ve got to have this back to me by tomorrow afternoon before chores begin.” She looked over her glasses at me with a hard blank stare. I nodded, pressed my thumbprint into the ink and pressed it next to the dress’ registration number, signing my name and compound number.

I was five when I came to the compound – too young to understand The Great Silence, or what it meant. The Great Silence. That was what it was called. Threatened by the artist’s community’s resistance to his policies, the president in those days waged a war against the arts. Friends of my parents, painters, fellow dancers, choreographers, donors and supporters, disappeared. Once the Empire City, Manhattan turned to a city of shadows. My mother and father began to speak of a rumor amongst dancers in the company. A safe compound at the Metropolitan museum of art. Some curators at the Met, who had worked in the basement, had discovered a series of deep tunnels underneath the museum, deep enough to protect and hide from what was to come.

“Name.”

“Anne.”

“Accompanied by?”

“My husband and daughter.”

“Registration numbers?” My mother slid a thick envelope of documents over to the curators. My thumb was taken and pressed into ink, printed right next to my name and number. My father set the heavy seed bags down, my mother carrying a bag of fertilizer, both of them

weighed down with jugs of water. Our apartment had been filling with bags and water jugs for weeks. I wondered, now, how my parents walked through the streets carrying all the supplies to the Met without raising suspicion. I supposed everybody was in a frenzy back then, unaware, really, of what was really going on. Those coming to the compound had been asked to stockpile, to bring what they could.

We spent our first year in dark tunnels, waiting out the disaster which had been whispered about for months. I don't remember much of that year, many days were spent hungry and with a dirty face. That year there was barely enough food to be rationed for everybody, though we had been warned to bring enough food provisions for a year

When we emerged from the tunnels in the wake of that terrible disaster, we were wan, many of our muscles atrophied. Though I was only six at the time, I felt something leave me in that year, something gossamer and shimmering, something irreplaceable. A woman, who had been pregnant in the tunnel, died in childbirth in the Egyptian wing, writhing on the floor, as there was only primitive medical care in the early days. My mother took me with her to the birth, wanting me to see the miracle of life, but all I remember is the smell of blood, the dark color spreading over the floor amidst the dust. Blood. That substance which binds birth and death, always represented with a red scarf on my mother's stage in performances of the Old City.

It was not until a few years later, motherless, that I let myself feel what I lost in those early years. Wandering through the galleries on my way to practice dance in front of the Degas dancers, I happened upon Picasso's portraits. Cube-like and flattened, I had always brushed passed them. On this day I stopped, studied the figures. In the planes of their faces I recognized I felt: wrenched from my own body, flattened by shadows, distorted.

In those days following our emergence from the tunnel, factions formed. The writers and sculptors and painters separated from each other, claimed their own spaces in the compound. Those who had loyally worked for the museum in the Old City: the janitors and security guards, were relegated to the darkest corners. The dancers collectively moved to the second floor in the musical instrument wing.

Sometimes, if the musicians were not so exhausted from their chores, they played music for the compound. My mother would guide everybody in choreography, the dancers would put on little shows for their families in the most furtive hours of the night. On these special nights, our wing came alive with the pattering of the dancer's feet. The compound became filled with the sounds of the Old City's opening nights. The Curators did not know of these performances – could not know. I once begged my mother to be in one of these midnight shows. She made me a skirt of cellophane and lifted me high in the air to be the queen Willie in *Giselle*.

My father knew of her escape. They had planned it together. She was the fire, the brave one. She escaped into that yellow outside world to seek another world for me. Or that's what my father told me on the rare occasion we spoke of her. The night before she left I had a dream of her dancing through yellow clouds melting her feet and toes. She fell in rain drops to water the trees of central park. In the morning she was gone. Hardly anybody danced after her departure. My father and I were a family of an Escaped. The Escaped were never mentioned – you turned phantasmal the second you stepped outside. In the museum's collective memory, the Escaped were mythologized, turned to ash by whatever hole they slipped through to the outside.

The museum grew darker and louder as it grew nearer to the time of the Ball. Girls rushed around me, giddy, with flushed cheeks. I treaded up the stairs to the dancer's quarters

where I had laid the dress. I picked it up, lightly ran my fingertips over the beads. I carried it into the Degas wing, stared at the little dancer as I unsnapped my overalls, lifted my sweat-stained shirt over my head. My knees were covered in dust, but I washed my face in the atrium's reflecting pool. The reflecting pool was a strange and wonderful attraction where, in the Old City, visitors would throw coins and make a wish. Sacrificing capital for hope. The coins still lay at the bottom of the pool, silver reminders of a vanished world. I slipped the dress over my head, it was heavy, grounding me. It fit perfectly, gliding over my hips and dipping in the back to reveal my shoulder blades. I would go barefoot this night.

In my mother's absence, Degas' dancers were my teachers and mirrors. I danced in front of their forms, copying their stances, transitioning smoothly between each of their poses. I conjured from memory my mother's choreography, what I saw her do onstage as the Prima. While I could have asked any of the other dancers in the compound, these painted dancers reminded me of my mother, not in form, but in presence, more than anybody else. I wanted to dance like her, to keep her style unsullied in my memory, not to be corrupted by any other living, moving teacher. Every night after my mother left, in those thick dark hours of the night, when nobody but the security guard's boy wandered the halls, staring dreamily at the paintings, I danced.

Ready to go downstairs, I curtsied to the little dancer in my finery and stuffed my dirty clothes into my pillowcase. I felt lighter than I had in weeks – I did not think of our escape, just of dancing. My father was packing the final provisions in the instrument gallery, lying in wait in his cot. We had mapped it out a week ago, what tunnels to go through, where the dirt formed a thinner ceiling to the open yellow air. I could tell he had done a run-through, his elbows and

forehead were smeared with dirt, not just his knees, which happened in the garden. He winked at me, “You look just like her in that. Like the old days.”

I smiled, “Thanks, Dad.” None of this would matter in a few hours – it was my last dance. We said nothing else. What was there to say? We would soon be leaving all of this behind. Leaving behind this colony of dancers and sculptors and musicians and painters and writers. We were giving it all up for empty yellow air and a recurring dream of my mother leaping with dissolving feet across an expanse of arid clouds.

I left my father upstairs to make his final adjustments and walked down the stairs into the Great Hall. As I moved through the crowd, the faces I saw on a daily basis were unrecognizable. They were lit with a joy I had never seen, their bodies hidden and plunged into theatrical finery. Women in jet black Victorian mourning garb talked with men draped in chinoiserie robes, there were girls in ethereal Edwardian empire waist dresses standing in line for the banquet. A man in a full armor suit clanked through stilted dance steps with a girl in a green suede dress with bell sleeves, and a woman in a high-necked white dress with a train and full sleeves ate a piece of cake with her hands. I moved through them all, until they were reduced to a blur of colors. I was not here for them – I was here to dance.

Raph, the security guard’s boy, a compound baby born in the Egyptian wing, stood watching the ball. He had slipped off the circulation desk bench, away from his father, to sit on one of the marble pedestals in the Classical wing to look at the stars and watch the goings-by. Everybody was transformed in their finery. Amongst the women in scallops, fringe, and lace, he caught a glimpse of Rose, who wore only a black drop waist sheath, tiny jet beads scattered on the silk glimmering as she moved. Somebody, one of the old musicians, had gotten somebody to

lug a piano down from upstairs, and strange and beautiful music from the Old City came from the other side of the hall and swelled to fit the space between people. The girl ignored the music, and danced to her own melody, alone at the end of the Greek and Roman wing, next to a nude Aphrodite. The Great Hall and Classical Wing echoed with laughter, with the rustle of silks, of beads, the clinking of forks, and Rose floated above it all.

Raph had seen her a few times before, at communal meals or sometimes during chores, though she and her father kept to themselves. Rose's mother, he heard it whispered, was one of the Escaped. The Escaped were never spoken of, never mentioned – to Escape was the worst crime of all. Nobody who escaped ever returned, though if anybody attempted to return, their punishment would be brutal.

Rose continued dancing, tendrils of hair slipped out from her hair tightly twisted at the nape of her neck. Raph was spellbound. Rose caught him watching her, and danced further into the shadows to her own melody. Raph stood up from under the Roman statue to follow. She wove in and out of the columns, her body liquid. He stumbled behind her, trying to keep up, until she stopped in the Roman cubicula and turned to look at him, pressed into a corner.

"I know you." He nodded. "You're the security guard's boy. I'm Rose." Again, He nodded. Raph's tongue was stuck in his throat "I see you sometimes – you know in the galleries at night, looking at the paintings." Rose cocked her head and waited for his reply, her foot tapping on the floor, impatiently waiting to be set free from conversation to dance once more.

Raph nodded again, "I – I see you dancing in front of the paintings when I do my walk-around, you know." Rose's foot-tapping increased in pace. "D'you want to dance?" Raph extended a clammy palm.

Rose winked, "I thought that was what we were doing." She took his hand and molded his body to move with hers. He followed her steps in and out of marble busts and Cycladic figurines, through aisles of amphoras and calyx kraters etched with immortalized heroes. They spun past Goliath and Medusa. Rose placed Raph's hand on her waist as they entered the great hall to dance amongst those clad in armor and corsets and trains. The rest of the crowd moved so less gracefully than Rose. The aging dancers danced quietly on the edges of the room, the act made painful for them by a shared history.

The Hall grew dim as the night grew later and the wax in the lanterns strung above wore down. Rose never stopped to take a break, and Raph's legs grew fatigued and stiff, but he refused to stop and miss a moment. She slowly drew him out of the crowd and up the Great Hall's staircase, through the galley. The scene below the widow's walk was one of blurred shapes and dazzling colors, a painting in movement. The music reverberated off the vaulted ceilings and Rose took Raph's hand to dance through the galleries. He shook my head, exhausted, but she led him through the galleries on what he knew was the path to the impressionist wing.

Raph followed Rose to a dim gallery with a glass case filled with imperfect bronze casts of dancers: Degas' dancers. She paced back and forth, inspecting them. Her hair had fallen out of its ties, and she turned to look at Raph where he stood in the doorway. "I remember my mother taking me here, to these three galleries when there was still a City. When she still worked."

Raph stepped a little farther into the gallery, intrigued, "You knew the Old City?"

Rose nodded and turned back to face the sculptures, her back muscles taught, "For five years I was alive before the compound, before the disaster. Walking down the streets, going to see my mother at the theater," She began to walk again to inspect another sculpture farther down

in the case, “She was a dancer with one of the companies in the city, you know. A prima, they used to call them. Plenty of them here, means nothing now.”

Rose walked into another gallery, lost in her thoughts. She stood looking up at the sculpture of the Little Dancer. “He won’t talk about her – my dad, I mean not really. Just like nobody talks about anybody who escapes. Nobody wants to *think* that there could be a world out there we know nothing about – maybe they’re rebuilding somewhere, maybe it’s not the wasteland everybody says it is.”

A chill ran down Raph’s spine – this was talk punishable to the highest degree. Nobody ever said these things. The compound baby and the ballerina’s daughter, alone in front of the Little Dancer. Raph thought of the greenish yellow light outside, the toxic air from which the compound protected its residents. “Rose, you really shouldn’t say things like that.” He didn’t like where this was going, the compound was all he’d ever known. The Curators knew what they were doing, he thought, he was safe here.

Rose, sensing some sort of withdrawal in Raph, became steel again. “The Ice 9 effect.”

“What?”

“Have you ever read the books from the Old City?”

Raph shook his head, “I’ve found some books in the museum, but they’re all either old religious texts or these really crumbly first editions or museum catalogues.”

Rose laughed, no more steel, “My mom used to read me this guy, Vonnegut. He wrote this story about how the world ended with this new element, Ice 9, how it froze everything over, and these two people, they’re the last people in the world, and they dig a tunnel and live out their days in a hole while their provisions last.”

Raph thought of the tunnels below the museum, of the stores of provisions in vaults. Nobody talked about when those provisions would run out. “That sounds like a pretty bleak book.”

“You think what we’re doing is any different?”

“Of course it is. We’ve got a whole colony of people – of artists, well, like not me and not my dad but a bunch of you people, I mean – “

“What good is our art if there’s nobody there to see it? And I’m not a real dancer – I’ve never been on the stage like my mom, never *will* be – that died with the Old City.”

“And we’re hardly in a hole, I mean,” Raph spun around, arms out wide, “*Look* at this stuff, it’s all I’ve ever known, it’s my world and people came to just *look* at this stuff in the Old City, but we *live here*.”

“A gilded cage is no less a prison.” Rose stopped, perhaps deciding she could not trust Raph after all. She put a finger to his lips and pressed her body against his, pulling him down with her. No cots in this wing – nobody wanted to be this far in the interior galleries. Her dress, as Raph slipped it over her head, was deceptively heavy and made a clattering noise as it dropped to the floor. The Little Dancer did not look down at the boy and girl, her face tilted stubbornly out at the gallery’s entrance, her leg turned defiantly outward.

Afterwards, Rose lay on Raph’s arm, her hair spread out wildly on the floor. Raph finally understood artists’ obsession with the female form –wanting to trap this ephemeral breathing thing in all its youth and wildness in its most vulnerable state amongst layers of oil or pastel or carve it into marble. Raph lacked the skill, could not trap this girl in a painting as the masters did. Did not have the talent of the artist for which he was named. A security guard’s boy, a compound baby. There would never be another night like this one, the dancing, everything glimmering and

unreal. He just wanted a part of this night to continue. Nights in the dark wing with his father amongst the mosaics and tapestries in their cool dark quarters suddenly seemed lonely. “I want to see you again.”

Rose was silent in Raph’s arms, her body stiffening, liquid form freezing. She propped herself up on one sinewy arm, twisting a lock of his hair in her fingers. She seemed to be deciding something. Rose softened again, put her head back on his shoulder. “I’m leaving in the morning.” She projected out in to the empty gallery. “My Dad’s already got everything ready in one of the tunnels. He prepared during the party. We’re getting out.”

Raph’s heart dropped. The Little Dancer, who had ignored them before, was now surely listening. “You’ll die out there, Rose.” Raph imagined Rose’s fluid body stiff and twisted, fallen in the street, starved, her lungs suffocated by the yellow air.

“That’s what the Curators *say*, that’s what they *tell you*, but I’ll never know for sure right? I mean what happened to all those other people the Escaped – to my mom? There’s got to be something out there – there are rumors, other compounds, ways to get out of this nuclear zone, there’s a whole world out there, other countries, *oceans*.” Oceans. Raph had only seen painted oceans, never a real one. He thought of the seascapes in the adjacent galleries – Cezanne’s flat sea, Monet’s illuminated by a bright orange sun. The *sun*. All he’d ever known of the world was through these artists’ eyes. But Rose, born a few years before, could fathom the idea of escape at this greater world.

“There’s nothing out there Rose.” Raph thought of the blackened landscape, visible from inside the atrium.

She put her head in her palm and turned to look at Raph, the muscles on her shoulder pronounced through her smooth skin, “That was the plan in the beginning – escape. You know,

when my mother's company was plunged into this terrible poverty and they were letting everybody go, my dad wanted to leave. But my *Mom*, she wanted to stand up, not to abandon all she had worked for, all that she and her company stood for. So they stayed, they stayed in the Old City until the end. It got to the point where the airports wouldn't let my family through just because of our skin color – we were trapped. Trapped until we came to this place. This other prison. Trapped until we came here to our hole.” Rose, knowing she had said too much, knowing the trapped boy who lay next to her would never tell her secrets, pressed her lips closed. She turned on her side, her shoulder blade pointed at Raph like a dagger, as defiantly thrust as the Little Dancer's right leg.

Raph couldn't say anything. He could not imagine his father ever suggesting leaving the Met, this museum he had been so loyal to in the Old City. The Egyptian wing was Raph's birthplace, the galleries his city streets. Leaving the compound. His chest tightened at the mere thought. The cityscapes he studied at strange post-midnight hours, of Rome, of Holland, of New York itself, were foreign to him. The people in those cityscapes were reduced to little dots amongst a vast maze of buildings. He could not imagine how it was in the old days, existing in the city as one of the dots. Raph could not fathom walking in open air. Not the yellowish air through the compound's glass, but this alien clean air of the paintings, the sun-soaked air that fell in dappled brushstrokes on impastoed grass.

Raph awoke with the compound's early morning bustle to a cramp in his back from sleeping on the gallery floor. Rose and her black dress were gone, and he suspected not even Degas' Little Dancer would tell him where. Rose turned, as the rest of the Escaped did, to dust in the compound's community, it was as if she had never existed. As if she had never danced like a

sprite, weaving through ancient statuary, as if she had never led him up the stairs of the great hall, never slipped away from her chores to look at Degas' dark mottled bronze-cast dancers.

Raph's father did not ask where he had been the night before. Raph's nights after Rose were colder, the solitary wing he and his father shared was no longer a haven, it was isolating. He regretted not having the skill of his namesake, of Raphael, to capture the luminosity of skin, the life in eyes. For nobody was ever as beautiful as Rose was that night. But that was an image only to remain in memory, to fade a little more each day as does a rose lose its pigment as it wilts.

Rose

I woke up on the hard floor of the Degas wing, bare body against the hardwood floor. The security guard's boy was curled next to me, his features blank in sleep. It had shocked him, what I told him the night before. He was young, could not understand the freedom of the Old City. He could not see the way it really was in the compound, the shells of lives we all led. He was lost in the imaginary painted worlds hanging on the walls of the museum, blind to the reality of the workings of this insular world. It was still very early in the morning – the compound was not yet animated with people beginning their days. I was right on schedule. The form of the Little Dancer stood above Raph, refusing to look at him, chin thrust out towards the doorway. She chose defiantly to remain, unhindered by glass or a frame. I wondered between the two of us who was braver.

I picked up the black dress from the floor, slipped it over my body, pulled back my hair. With silent bare feet I crept out of the gallery, leaving Degas' dancers for the last time. The Little Dancer was the only soul awake to witness my departure. I found my father sitting cross-legged

on his cot, our compact bags packed. He nodded at some folded clothes on my own cot, urging me to change. I shook my head. I was leaving this place in the dress. My father urgently motioned to the clothes again, “Rose, we have *no* idea what these conditions are going to be like, you *can’t* wear that.” I put my hand to my lips, looking around at the sleeping bodies tucked into other corners of the musical wing. I gathered my things and tiptoed out of the wing, my father following me. As soon as we got into the hall, he grabbed my arm. “*Rose. We have got* to do everything according to plan – you were supposed to return that dress – they’ve got it registered, they’ll know.”

“I don’t care. It doesn’t matter, Dad. Once we’re out we’re *out*, what are they going to do?”

My father shook his head, slung the pack over his shoulder, nodded at me to do the same. We crept down the stairs in the dim light, the great hall littered with discarded plates, scraps of paper lanterns. We kept to the walls, creeping along the sides should the Curators see us from their posts in the Southwest balcony. My dress rustled against my pack as we descended the flights of stairs, past the vaults. At the opening to the tunnels, from which we had emerged into the compound so many years before, the first step to losing my mother, my father turned to look at me. “Last chance, Rose.”

My heart was pounding in my chest beneath the black jet beads, my hair sticking to my neck in the humidity. “There’s nothing left for us here, Dad.”

My father nodded once, “Let’s go then.” The smell of the rank earthy air filled my nose as we crawled through the dark tunnels. At the narrower parts of the tunnels, we were forced to crawl. My knees, exposed in the dress, sunk into the earth and the beads caught on withered black roots peaking through the earth. In the darkness I imagined a phantasmal figure in a red

coat and dirty face peaking out at the turns – a ghostly dancer stretching along the earthen walls. After what seemed like hours of hunching and crawling through the earth, my father put his hand out to stop me. The air in the tunnel had grown warmer, drier. I craned my chin. A hole was carved out of the earth, big enough for us to slip through. Yellow light fell in an irregular circle on the mud floor, shedding light on my bare feet. I looked up again at the light shining through the hole, a charred city awaiting us on the other side. I fingered the hem of my dress, the dress of Odile. I thought of the party, of the Little Dancer, of Raph lying in the museum's upper floor. I thought of my mother leaping across the Old City's stage as the Firebird, escaping the Prince's entrapment. It was time to face Vonnegut's Ice-9. I took my father's hand, squeezed it, and reached up to the hole, hoisting myself up and through to breath the free air of the yellow outside world.