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The Girl in the Portrait

“Do you ever stop?” Her friend Bea asked, though Margot knew it was more of a statement.

She lifted her foot off the barre, turning to stare at her friend. “Nope.”

Bea rolled her eyes.

Margot laughed, “what?”

“You have no life.” Bea smirked teasingly.

“Ha ha!” Margot laughed sarcastically. “Thats how I get to the top. I can’t slack off now, I’ve only just started.”

“Yeah, yeah. I just think you’re dancing yourself into an early grave” Bea said, her expression serious. “You don’t rest, you don’t take breaks, you barely eat. Your legs will give out.”

“You’re being ridiculous, it’s ballet no one eats.” Margot joked, waving her hand dismissively as she turned back to her stretching.

“You know tonight’s routine! You’re perfect, why are you still practicing? You should be resting for the performance tonight.”

“Bea, I’ll be fine. Besides there’s no such thing as ‘perfect’.” Margot air quoted.

Bea sighed in resignation “Fine, see you tonight then?”

Margot nodded, watching Bea leave the room.

Margot stood by the couch in her otherwise empty living room, observing the men moving boxes here and there. The thought of having to, later, organize each item made her regret moving, but this was a new start, away from the Royal Academy, away from the accident and away from all the pitiful stares of her colleagues. “So young,” they’d say. “Her whole career ahead of her.”

“Miss?”

A thick Irish accent interrupted her thoughts. “Hi! Sorry, I was lost in thought.” she apologized.

The man smiled. “Don’t be worrying about that Miss.” He pulled out a clipboard and a pen from a large pocket. “Just need you to sign off here”.

She thanked him, handing him 30 quid to split with the others. “You boys go buy yourselves a beer,” she smiled.

He returned her smile before he gathered the rest of the men and left

She flopped down on the couch, groaning. She shouldn't stand for so long; the sharp pain in her hip was all the reminder she needed. Tears of frustration stung her eyes as she continued to press against the painful spot, four months of physical therapy, for what? Her phone vibrated in her back pocket. She stretched, pulling her body up to reach the phone. Missed call from 'Bea.' she sighed. She'd never hear the end of it if she ignored her. The phone barely rang before her friend picked up.

"Margot!" she said excitedly "Are you at the apartment already?"

Margot turned the camera around to show her.

Bea gasped, admiring the space. "It looks great!" she exclaimed

Margot smiled. "Yeah! It's a little rough around the edges, but it has potential." she paused before asking, "how was the performance?"

"...Good."

Margot resented the hesitation in Bea's voice. Ever since Bea replaced her in Swan Lake, after the accident, she has awkwardly diverted any questions about the academy or ballet in general. Margot couldn't understand why, it's not like she stole it, besides she wouldn't be dancing anytime soon, or possibly ever again.

"Sooo whatcha doing today in *bonnie Lisburn*?" Bea tried an Irish accent, failing miserably, "Exploring the city? Pub hopping?" Her voice was sheepish.

Margot giggled. "First of all, 'bonnie' is Scottish" Bea muttered something about her being a know-it-all before Margot continued "I was thinking of hoping over to Belfast, maybe going thrifting for some furniture, it's only a 20-minute drive and I won't need to walk much." Margot winced, but her voice was playful.

Bea's face dropped "right, well I'm sure if you get some rest, you'll be able to hit a few stores."

"Yeah." There was an awkward silence before Margot said, "Ok, talk soon!"

"Have fun!" With that, Bea ended the call.

Margot sat on the couch for a while before searching google for the best antique stores in Belfast, after finding a suitable one she stood up, the sharp pang in her stomach reminding her she had to eat, she ignored it, walking slowly towards the counter and grabbing her keys. She'd eat when she got back.

The drive to Belfast was serene. She marveled at the tranquility of the Irish landscape – rolling fields decorated with flowers, sheep and cattle. The breathtaking sight felt like a welcome escape from the bustling chaos of London, at least that's what Margot told herself. Seeking reassurance that this change of scenery was for the better.

Following the GPS, she drove to an old narrow brick road, parking her car before she decided to walk the remaining distance, disregarding the protest of her mangled hips. She feared if she drove further in, she'd never be able to maneuver back. She stopped in front of a decrepit-looking house. Its old wooden windows were adorned with green peeling paint, the white of its walls stained yellow with time. She stepped forward, eyeing the rotting door before opening it carefully, the tinkle of the wind chimes announcing her arrival.

"Welcome, fresh face!" Came a gentle voice from behind the counter, where a middle-aged woman with messy, tight blond curls sat. She donned a billowy blouse paired with a mid-length skirt, she peered at Margot through her half-moon glasses. "Let me know if you're in need of anythin." She offered. Margot thanked her and began meandering around the store.

The lack of order was evident as items were haphazardly arranged, piled on top of one another or strewn against the store's old cabinets and chairs. As Margot's gaze roamed, it settled on a specific stack, while it appeared no different than the rest, an inexplicable allure called to her. Intrigued, her hands moved towards the pile as if guided by an unseen force, delicately sifting through the pile. Margot sought nothing specific, all she knew was that she had an unidentifiable urge she needed to satisfy.

Her hands paused as they landed on a small painting, roughly the size of her head and neck. The artwork was of a young girl, not much younger than her, facing away, one leg crossed under her, as she carefully tied her point shoes. Gazing at it, Margot admired its beauty – perfect for her bedroom, she thought. There was an irresistible charm to it, something that captivated and thrilled her.

“Grand isn't it? Returned jus this mornin,” the woman spoke from behind her, startling her from her haze.

“Beautiful,” said Margot, goosebumps covered her arms and back as she held on to it “how much?”

“Last time I sold it for 50 quid” the woman paused, flashing a yellowed smile. “Fer you, 10.”

Margot's eyes widened, “really?”

“Shure thin.”

“Why was it returned?” Margot asked, curiosity eating at her.

“Old owner disappeared, left the painting,” the old woman said. “The family brought it back to me.” she hesitated “The girl wasn’t much older than you I suppose.” She smiled. “Come this way to pay.”

Margot followed the woman to the register where she fished ten quid from her large tote.

“A word of warnin to you miss,” said the woman, her voice now gruff compared to its former wispy softness. “She’ll show you thins you may not want to see.” Before Margot could question her, the woman’s expression returned to its usual cheer. “Have a great day!”

Margot nodded. Strange, she thought. Her hand rested protectively over the painting inside her bag as she made her way to her car. Turning to look at the shop one last time, the lights were off, and the woman was nowhere to be seen.