

The Miscellaneous Exhibitions Room
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“And, If you’ll look to your right,” the museum guide said, “you’ll see an impeccable illustration of how, in the hunter-gatherer era around seventy thousand years ago, communities managed to hunt and kill whole herds of woolly mammoths by using fire to scare them off of cliffs.”

I reluctantly looked to my right to see a dusty oil painting depicting three dozen or so men maniacally running towards a group of huddled woolly mammoths. They were perched precariously atop a cliff, and a black backdrop dotted with stars covered the spacious upper portion of the canvas. It didn’t—from my overly critical artistic perspective—seem in the least bit impeccable. In fact, the brush work almost verged on sloppy, and the artist appeared to have chosen a much too conventional orange for the fire, giving it an almost citrus tinge.

In front of me, a large mother and her detached 8-year-old daughter ignored the tour and whispered politely back and forth. The daughter was growing increasingly irritated and quickly took on a tone of childish austerity.

“Can you see the painting honey? Darling? Can you see the painting?”

“Yes mummy, I can see.”

“Are you sure? I can lift you up for a moment if you’d—”

“No, mummy. I’m fine.”

“Alright. If you’re sure. Just tell me if you change your mind, and I can lift you right—”

“Mummy. Leave it. Please.”

“Alright. Sorry dear. If you’re cold at all, and would like your jacket, just say the word.”

“Mummy. Be quiet.”

“Yes, alright. But if you’d like your jacket—”

“Mummy!”

“And now, to your left,” the museum guide was saying, “You’ll see an arrangement of tools that were used for multiple day-to-day tasks by these very same hunter-gatherers. These are just models, of course, but true to the original form nonetheless.” The museum guide was an extremely short middle aged man who had the faint—but undeniable—appearance of a fat rat wearing glasses. His hair (the little he had) was combed back in thin grey strands which fell past the nape of his neck and down beyond his shirt collar in a pathetic ponytail. Needless to say, he was unpleasant to look at, not to mention listen to, and I felt a very profound sadness for him; he was most certainly alone in life.

The tour, however, was inexcusably boring. So, without waiting for the long monologue explaining the hunter-gatherer nutritional habits that I felt was sure to come, I ducked down a side corridor and left the mother and daughter to their squabbling. The corridor that I had chosen to escape down was long, narrow, and, conforming to the rest of the museum, extremely poorly

lit. A service elevator filled the back wall, and a parade of doors lined either side of the passage. Numbers and labels had been painted on every door, announcing the specific use of each and the reason for which it should be considered by all an Amenity. I passed several nondescript store rooms, a janitor's closet, a staff break room, and two washrooms (a gents and a ladies), before finally coming to a stop in front of a door labelled 'Miscellaneous Exhibitions'. The door had no window to peep through, nor did it have a handle of any sort or size. I tentatively gave it a push, and, to my ecstatic surprise, it gave way and swung easily open.

It was pitch black, and I scrambled around helplessly just inside and to the right of the door for several minutes before I managed to find a light switch and flick it on. Unlike their coworkers in the hall, the lights inside the 'Miscellaneous Exhibitions' room were utterly blinding, and my eyes took a few long, painful moments to adjust. Once they had, however, it took me another few moments to fully appreciate the seeming interminableness of the room. It appeared that I had wandered into some sort of warehouse, with boxes and crates of varying sizes stacked into teetering towers stretching dozens of feet high. The room was so large, in fact, that it could have graciously doubled as an airplane hangar and still have left room for a nice little exhibition on the prehistoric peoples. Thankfully, though, there wasn't a single thing (as far as I could see or otherwise tell) alluding to my previous museum experience. Instead, to my delight, the boxes—the ones that were open or made of glass—were filled with perpetually different and strange objects and arrangements. One was filled to the brim with jars of pickled eels and other exotic marine life, while the next contained assorted scriptures from the Chang Dynasty. I assumed, or forced myself to the assumption, that these were authentic, but in all reality, they were probably only slightly older than the boxes that held them.

I made my way slowly down among all the crates and treasures, only slightly terrified of being discovered and made to leave (or worse, return to the tour). After a good half-hour of wandering, it occurred to me that there was a small chance—a very small, but nonetheless formidable chance—that I might be lost. Every box and container was so oblique and different from its companions that they all looked exactly the same. I turned in a slow circle, scanning the contents of each open container in a calm but desperate attempt to find familiarity. That was when, again to my surprise, my eyes found and could not help but linger upon a white, oddly shaped sheet. I walked carefully over to it and, taking the edges of the sheet between my thumb and forefinger, pulled it away. After the dust (of which there was an astonishing amount) had settled, my intrigue was immediately piqued and my rather worrying predicament was forgotten. For there, sitting on a small coffee table, was an exceptionally large toad. I knelt down on one knee and examined the specimen carefully with the same artistic perspective as I had the painting. But unlike the painting, the toad really did seem to be—to the fullest definition of the word—impeccable. He appeared to have been stuffed and preserved with a thin layer of waxy lamination, and he had two large splotches of disfiguration on his underside. His eyes were yellow and uncannily realistic.

"Hello there," I said, more to myself than the toad.

“Hello yourself,” the toad said. Understandably, at that particular moment I was utterly shocked. If I were to be completely honest, to the fullest of my capabilities, I would say that I’d never been so close (and excuse the cliché) to pinching myself. It took me several long moments (during which I stared awkwardly at the expectant toad) to find my bearings and make a reply.

“Well. I’ve never met a talking toad in my entire life.” I said.

“We are a rare breed, I’ll give you that,” the toad said. “Hey, you got any cigarettes? I’ve been dying for a smoke.”

“Sure,” I said. I took a pack of cigarettes out of my breast pocket, put one in his mouth, and gave him a light.

“Whatcha doin’ here, anyways?” I said.

“I could ask you the same,” he said.

“I got lost,” I said. “The tour was too goddamn boring. What about you?”

“Well,” the toad said. “It’s a long story.”

“I got time,” I said. I really did have time. I was in no rush whatsoever.

“Alright,” the toad said. He blew out some smoke. “I’ll start from the beginning then, if that’s really what you want. It’s been a while since I’ve had anyone to talk to.” He tilted his head slightly to the left as if searching for my approval, in a way so at odds with his initial display of bravado. His hideous and yet somehow captivating yellow eyes seemed to glow brighter under the fluorescent lights and I nodded. What were my other options, really? Finding my way out of this maze and back to that insufferable tour to listen to the pounchy and pitiful man tell me things I learned in fifth grade from the dreadfully dull Mr. Davine? Maybe instead of listening to him, I could listen to the overbearing mother on her crusade to become helicopter parent of the century. *Oh the horror of being forced into this oh so difficult this decision*, I thought. I would roll my eyes but I wouldn’t want to offend the strange and fascinating figure of unknown social literacy in front of me.

“Really, I’m in no rush,” I replied.

“Well,” said the toad. Then he coughed, a wet and squelchy noise that I cannot describe other than to say it was so distinctively amphibian that I was once again taken aback by the utter strangeness of the situation in which I had found myself. “If I recall correctly,” he began, “my memories only date back to when I was three, maybe four years old. I was living just off Route 83 down near this old swamp that has been there and probably will be there forever. It was dirty, this place, but there was always this sheen of oil across the top of it which looked so pretty with its blues and purples. And I remember feeling like I just had to get right up close and burrow into it, you know? But the colour was so foreign that it terrified me as well... But it was mating season, and there were so many other males around and I was so young and shrimpy that I felt like I had to do something to stand out. So I dug my way deep into that oil-slick mud, and was it ever glorious for those few moments. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the wetter part of the marsh, and you wouldn’t believe how *sexy* I looked with that shimmering oil coating me from head to toe. And the females pounced on me. I got through only a few, however, before my skin

started to feel crazy tight and my brain went all loopy. I remember staggering in circles for a while with nothing but an intense feeling of shame for what the females must think of me spiralling around in my head. At some point I collapsed, I guess. Somewhere in the cattails. If my brain had been getting enough oxygen to put together any semi-coherent thought, my life probably would have flashed before my eyes at this point—that's what you say happens when you're dying, isn't it?"

His head was tilted to the left again so I nodded once more, trying to keep the puzzlement raging inside my head from reaching my eyes. He understood our human and so infinitely clichéd ideas about death. *What in all hell is this?*, I couldn't help but think.

"But I wasn't dead after that. It was strange, but the next thing I remember was floating on my back in what I would assume was a bathtub. It was whiter and more pristine than anything I had ever seen before, I'm sure, but all I really remember of that moment was the *indignity* I felt at having been laid in a tub of water like a *tadpole* or worse even, a common *bullfrog*. We toads don't live *in* water, you see. We live near water, we love mud, but we leave the pointless and dimwitted swimming-in-circles-thing to the frogs." He paused here for a moment, then: "And I suppose I can admit now that some of the anger I felt may have existed because of the fear I have always had of deep water. No, don't laugh, I'm being big about this, I'm laying my soul *bare* to you, the least you could do is refrain from mocking me,"

I wasn't laughing, really I wasn't. But the thought of a near-frog so terrified of water did bring a half-smile to my lips that I couldn't quite hide. "Sorry," I said. This creature mystified me, simultaneously so childlike in his need for approval and adolescent in his feigned bravado.

"I was just kidding," said the toad as he paused to take another pull from the cigarette now greatly diminished in size. "It is rather comic, isn't it? I'm sure there's a reason for it but really, I couldn't tell you what it was if you held my neck in a noose and planned to set me swinging. Anyways, the bathtub. So of course as soon as I awoke in this foreign and deeply offensive environment I began to thrash about in search of a bank I could climb out on, but there was no bank. I must have swum twenty or so circles around that little tub before a pair of great, meaty hands reached down and scooped my body from the water, depositing it in a moderately sized crate filled with sand, lawn clippings, and bits of half-dried moss. There was a small pool made from the chopped-off bottom of a four gallon yoghurt container in the corner of the crate too, but thinking of it still makes me shudder so we'll just pretend it wasn't there at all, okay?"

It was a rhetorical question, I was quite sure, but I nodded anyway. Better safe than sorry.

"Those hammy hands, I later learned, belonged to the fat kid who had rescued me. I discovered this some time later as I learned to distinguish between the human forms that delivered an array of insects—some fresh, some less so—to my new dwelling each morning. There was the fat kid, Jamie, they called him, all soft lines and pudginess spilling over the belt on his jeans. And there was Maurice, he was bald or almost. And then Elsie with the unbearably red face and soap-worn hands." He paused for a second, then "Can you guess who taught me to

smoke?” he asked, holding out his webbed left front appendage for another cigarette. The nub of the other had fallen to the table minutes earlier.

“Umm... Maurice?” I replied, though really I didn’t have a clue. I pulled the pack of cigarettes once again from my breast pocket and placed one in his outstretched hand.

“Light?” he said.

“Of course, my apologies.” I fumbled deeper into the same pocket in search of the lighter. I found it after a moment and lit the end of the toad’s cigarette.

He dipped his head forward slightly in thanks before inhaling deeply. This gesture resembled oddly that of an olden-days gentleman tipping his cap to the pretty young woman he encountered in the street. *Good day to you, Ms. Fawcett*, the toad may as well have said.

“It wasn’t Maurice, though you’d think it would be, wouldn’t you? Nah, it was the red-faced woman, Elsie. I think she was pretty sad and she smoked a lot. I lived in this crate right by the window and sometimes when it got all wet and rainy outside I could see her standing there in the lawn, just looking up at the clouds as the rain made her hair all stringy and wet. She would toss the butts of her old cigarettes into the little pool inside my crate; I guess she must’ve liked watching them fizzle out in there. She did this every hour or two and every hour or two I’d watch her do it. At some point I think she got bored and she asked me if I wanted to try. I didn’t speak much Human at that point but I understood well enough and I told her yes, yes I did want to try. She looked much like you did when you heard me speak for the first time, so stunned, so completely flabbergasted, but she lit me the cigarette anyways.”

What an odd picture that must have been, I thought. Though really it was no more odd than that which the two of us formed in the glaringly bright room at that moment.

“We talked after that,” the toad continued, “well she talked and I nodded once and a while and interjected a few words here and there. And when she got a little tipsy on Saturday afternoons she would beg me to sing for her like her fat son did sometimes. I’m not much of a singer, but I was happy to indulge her once and a while. And that’s it, really: she talked, I listened, she drank, we smoked, I sang. I don’t know why there are so few like me as it really was easy enough. Learning your language, I mean.” He trailed off then.

The toad had rearranged himself as he spoke and he was balanced, at this point, on his rear end with his left foot sticking straight out in front of him. The blemishes on his chest had become exceedingly prominent. They resembled two little poorly measured and therefore sewn-shut eyelids on the face of an otherwise impeccably designed doll. Yes, he was so perfectly proportioned and artfully preserved that he resembled one of those china dolls that always seem to find their way into horror movies and children’s stories alike. It was rude to stare at his body as I did, especially as I knew the artist’s fascination with which I regarded him could not help but show on my face, but a part of me felt that social courtesies and the generally unavoidable displays of deference were hardly mandatory in an interaction with a toad, even a toad so advanced as this one, and so I continued to stare.

“I see,” I said. “That does seem strange indeed if human speech is really so simple as you make it sound... And I’ve never met another like you, I’ll admit. But what about the rest of the story? Why are you *here* instead of with the fat boy and the bald man and the sad and red-faced woman?”

“Well to be perfectly honest, I don’t *know* why I ended up here. I wouldn’t have chosen it, that’s for certain. Too much darkness, too little mud and company. I really miss the mud. The company too, I suppose. All I know is that I lived with that family for years and really, it wasn’t so bad. I told the fat kid, eventually, that I wanted to go outside and so he let me. And I found a small marsh near enough to the house, the banks of which were angled to form the perfect clay slip-n-slide. It was great, actually: I spent most mornings when the weather was mild by the pond, then later I would return to my crate and talk and laugh and sing with the family. Maurice didn’t like me for a while, I’m sure of it, but eventually he warmed up to me and we were like a family.”

His eyes, glass as I knew they should be, appeared to grow misty as he said the last.

“This went on for a while, but then I got sick--maybe I never really recovered from the oil incident. They knew I probably wouldn’t get better, but they took me to a vet anyway and made me sit quietly as I was poked and prodded by a pair of blue-gloved hands. I remember there being a lot of crying for weeks, *especially* from the red-faced one and the emotionally maladjusted fat kid. And then I don’t really remember much until the day I woke up in a box somewhere with these two scars on my chest, foul-smelling fluid inside my veins, and in, remarkably, the best shape of my life.” At this point he tucked his chin to his chest in a futile attempt to see the scars he was referring to, “The box was shaking a bunch when I woke up so I assume I was in the back of a truck. Plane, maybe. And as soon as the shaking stopped I was picked up by someone and carried into, I guess, this place. They left me on this table to nose my own way out of the box and I’ve been here ever since. It’s hard to say how long it’s been, really. Time kind of wraps up and around itself when the lights hardly ever turn on and no one even comes by to say hello.” He raised his arms in a half-defeated sort of *Whaddayagonnado?* expression.

“I can imagine it gets quite lonely,” I said. I wasn’t entirely sure how to console a helpless toad. “Would you like another cigarette?”

“Yes, I’ll take a cigarette. Thank you.” I nodded and produced the pack from my coat pocket. “Of course it gets lonely.” He thought for a moment, then looked up at me hopefully. “I don’t suppose you would want to stay for a while? Here, that is. Not forever, but for a little while? The days do drag on so long with no one here to talk to. This place lends itself to a very spiritual existence, if that entices you at all..?”

“It certainly is enticing,” I said. “However, I’m afraid I have more than just myself to consider.”

“I see,” the toad said. He hung his head dejectedly. “Well any time you’ve got, really...”

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll return at the earliest convenience.”

“Thank you. I really do appreciate it. Both the cigarettes and the company.”

I smiled and took three more cigarettes from my coat. I propped them up in a line against the toad’s torso and placed my lighter in front of them. We were both silent. A few tears slowly rolled down the toad’s cheeks and fell with a splash onto the pile of cigarette ashes. It took only a few moments of awkward silence before I said my goodbyes and left him sitting there, alone on the coffee table.

After the encounter, I stopped frequenting the museum entirely. I was quite content in my own life, away from the miserableness of that place, and I opted to entertain apathy over empathy for the toad’s predicament. He had three cigarettes, a lighter, and a place for infinite reflection; it was much more than any other toad had ever received.