1st Place Adult Short Story

Title: Past Tense

By Michael Norton

While waiting for an old friend at the edge of a reservoir, imagining us watching the bats and beavers in the dusk and recalling to each other how our lives had been plodding along, I picked up a speckled rock, considered keeping it forever, reconsidered, and tossed it into the reservoir, which I was told provides emergency drinking water to the city. I didn't like thinking about what sort of emergency would necessitate that, so instead I watched the concentric rings of the splash form and fade, and it reminded me of a job I once had as a security guard in an art museum.

It was a hulking concrete building plopped in the middle of a field and filled with expensive curiosities from the last century. My job was to stand in a gallery. I was only there for two months, not because of any fault of my own, but because of funding issues—a security guard job with no security. When I told my mother I had been RIF'd, she wasn't sure what that meant. My brother thought it sounded like a sci-fi concept, a rift in space-time sucking me into another dimension. I explained to him that the word was RIF, a reduction in force. I didn't bother explaining it to my mom. I just assured her that I'd find something else, something better; I've almost managed to find something better.

For those two months, I stood in one corner of a gallery, and in the center was what appeared to be a normal lamp atop a wooden table. It wouldn't have looked out of place in your grandmother's living room. The table was made of dark stained wood without decoration. The lamp was just as plain. I was so bored at that museum that I read every placard over and over, so that now, though I struggle to remember the birthdays of my oldest friends or the plots of books I once loved, I remember the finer points of pointillism, the names of deceased art donors, and that the lamp was called The Luminar. From the top of the lamp shot beams of colored light that danced across the ceiling in a slow ballet, colors shifting and swirling. The table hid the mechanism of rotating reflectors and painted glass panels. Sometimes the light resembled an aquatic scene: gentle waves, seaweed caught in a current, ripples in a reservoir. Sometimes it looked like outer space: the birth or death of a star, pink and green radiation crisscrossing the cosmos, a black hole widening.

From the placard, I learned that the artist, Thomas Wilfred, would have hated these interpretations. He hated all interpretations of his light art, “lumia” as he named it. Lumia was intended to be a new art form, free of connotation, narrative, drama, emotion. An art free of humanity, light for light’s sake. He wanted it to be slow; he wanted people to just sit there and resist the cloud-gazing urge to point up and say, “Look! There’s a bunny! There’s a castle! There’s a jellyfish!” It was an old exhibit, more mausoleum than museum. Guests entered the gallery, looked at the light, tried to figure out how it worked, tried to figure out what it meant, got bored, and then left. There were a few long, low, faux leather couches so guests could theoretically sit or lie down and soak up the lumia, but hardly anyone did. As dictated by the artist, there was no music in the gallery to corrupt his piece, and the lights were kept dim. The gallery became a hallway leading to the popular Hopper painting in the next room.

The only person who ever sat on those couches for more than a minute was a young woman. The first time I saw her, I assumed she was there for an assignment, sent by some college professor to seek out obscure art, since she was attempting to capture the fleeting light display on a sketch pad. She came equipped with colored pencils. It was my job, technically speaking, to watch people at the museum, to make sure they didn’t touch the art, to make sure they didn’t drink or eat in the gallery, but I was always uncomfortable with it. I had been taught that staring was impolite. I didn’t want to make people feel uncomfortable. So I averted my gaze; I read the placards. But still, you notice things in your periphery. I noticed that this woman became a daily visitor to the gallery, always sitting quite still, only her hand moving the pencils across the page.

I made no friends at the museum. The curators and admins looked down on security guards as beneath them, and I found the other guards aloof and a bit beneath me, though I’m embarrassed to admit that. The woman with the colored pencils was the only person I saw at the museum who didn’t have negativity spiraling around her. Once I’d been RIF’d and told I had two weeks left, and after considerable rehearsing, I took it upon myself to close the gap between two familiar strangers, careful to find the words that would come across as not threatening, not odd, not too nosy. I don’t remember if I was driven more by sheer boredom or an earnest need for human connection, but I do remember that my opening lines were bad.

I said to her, “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but notice you really like that piece. I’ve seen you before.”

“I would hope a security guard sees everything,” she replied without looking at me, swirling the tip of a deep blue pencil around and around to mimic the light, “and just because someone is trying to understand something doesn’t mean they like it.”

I had not rehearsed for this response, so I jumped several lines forward in my imaginary script. “It’s just … you’ve reminded me of that character in *Vertigo* who goes to look at the same museum portrait every day. Though that was, if I remember correctly, a sort of deception, a sort of …”

“Don’t do that. Don’t assume I’ve seen what you’ve seen. Don’t spoil a movie. What a nasty urge: to feel superior in that way. To show off some trivial knowledge,” she scolded.

“It’s been out for like 50 years.”

“So? I haven’t seen it.”

“Do you want to?”

“Not really.”

“All I meant was …” and then I realized I didn’t know what I had meant by bringing up *Vertigo*, a movie I had mostly forgotten. Luckily, I didn’t scare her away and she returned to the gallery the next day and then the day after that. At first, I didn’t say anything to her. But we would acknowledge each other with head nods and small smiles. When the gallery was about to close—she tended to stay there most of the day—I would inform her in a casual, friendly tone, not the authoritative script my manager had told me to repeat.

We had micro-conversations. Once, I offered to get her something from the cafe since she had been in the gallery all day without eating, and she answered, “No, thank you.” Another day, she told me my shoe was untied, and I replied, “Oh!” One time, I was tempted to compliment her crocheted scarf, curious if she had made it herself, but that felt like overstepping, so I just asked, “Is it cold outside?” and she told me, “Yes, it is.” I took this as a golden opportunity and continued the conversation with, “It’s been a chilly fall,” to which she retorted, “Though not as cold as last year.”

I never learned her name, and I'm unsure if she ever saw mine on the little tag on my uniform, but names are just one part of a person, and quite a small part. Eventually, curiosity conquered, and I asked her what she was doing with her pencils. I don't recall the exact words I used, probably because they were clunky and unrehearsed. But I do remember how she answered.

"My sister likes this art. She likes the blues in it," she uttered with such a force of finality that I just nodded. It was the first detail about her life I knew, and my mind raced. Should I tell her I have a sibling, too? Should I tell her I like blue? Does everyone like blue? While I was contemplating this, she continued, still craning her neck upward, "I had a dream last night. I don't sleep a lot. When I do, I don't dream. But last night, I did. The whole scene was bathed in this light. I was in our old cul-de-sac, and you were there, too, and also a dog with the eyes of an owl, and it wanted to hurt me, and I saw its belly, and I …"

"Don't do that. Don't assume I want to hear about your dream. Don't spoil a dream. What a nasty urge: to show off some trivial knowledge of your own unconscious," I teased.

She looked at me, the lumia shifted from blue to green above her, and then she smiled. She must have recognized that I had actually listened to her when she was reprimanding me the other day.

"You know, I'm glad I don't dream often. Dreams are stupid," she said.

I wanted to argue against that point, but I didn't. Instead, I asked, "Why are you drawing the lights?"

"My sister likes this art," she whispered with a wistfulness that stopped me from inquiring further.

This is the limit of rehearsal. I didn't know what to say or do next, and she must have sensed that, because she went on: "There was a scientist once, in the 1800s I think, who studied memory by making up a bunch of three-letter nonsense syllables like MIP and WEX and ZOG, and then he tried to commit them to memory. When he tested himself later, he found that he forgot over half of the words in only nine hours. When I read that, it made me really sad. But I don't cry. I've never really been able to. Sadness just turns into a headache. It feels like right before a storm, when the pressure drops and everything just feels wrong."

“RIF is a good three-letter nonsense word,” I joked.

She smiled. “So are RIX and RIN and REP.”

“Rep is a real word, though,” I said, “repetition.”

“Or representative,” she added. “I hate that we forget so much.”

“So, you hate forgetting and you hate dreams and you hate spoiled movies, but you like lumia.”

“I don’t like it. My sister did. She liked this museum. Blue was her favorite color.”

The past tense hung there like a dark cloud. I watched it floating around the room and she noticed my noticing, and then we sat in the silence, as the artist intended.

“She always told me I should come here to look at the lights. But I was a kid then, and I found museums boring. I still do. I would get scared in the night and I’d go into her room, and she would let me sleep beside her. I was beside her every night. She pretended to hate it, but I knew she didn’t. I don’t like telling people this. When you speak a memory out loud, it changes on a physical level in your brain. She liked these lights a lot, and I made fun of her for it. She had a heart condition. One of those ones that you don’t know about until … she died in her sleep. They said it was peaceful. I’m not sure. I woke up next to her. I’m sorry. You don’t need to know all this.”

While I struggled to find the right thing to say, she snatched up her drawings and pencil box and left. I wanted to chase after her, but I wasn’t allowed to leave the gallery, and anyway, it’s clear when someone doesn’t want to be followed. I spent the rest of my shift rehearsing what I would say to her the next day, but when I was leaving the museum that evening, I saw that the trash can by the exit was overflowing with torn sketch pad pages, each covered in delicate swirls of lumia blue. The pencils were there, too, and one was sticking up like a pole left by an Arctic explorer in the wasteland, the flag long ripped off and taken by the wind.

She didn’t return to the gallery the next day, and by the end of the week I was RIF’d. I wanted to find her, but I knew nothing about her except for a dream she once had and the worst moment in her life. I tried to find her sister’s obituary with the scant details I had until

I realized I was being foolish and distracting myself from finding a new job, finding something better.

The ripples in the reservoir disappeared as I thought about those lights on the ceiling and seeing that trash can full of her sketches, and I realized my friend was very late, a bad habit of hers, and that the bats had already flown across the water and that the beavers had already retreated into their dams to sleep. I wasn't angry at my friend. We had planned this little rendezvous last minute. It's easy to forget to remember.