

Elio

I don't know why I did it.

I want to blame Paula, and her incessant need to drag me along to any event she simply prophesized would be "a complete and utter drag without you, El", only to leave me at the first glimpse of any eligible bachelor in the crowd. Of course, they didn't actually have to be eligible, averagely handsome sufficed on most nights. They didn't really have to be bachelors either. The truth is, that in spite of this habit of hers, I probably would have said yes, even if she hadn't mentioned offhandedly my father. The main reason I would have come along either way, was because I was in desperate need of a distraction. And when I feel like that, few people are better suited to help me than Paula.

I barely even paid attention to what she said, aside from "it's the opening of this exhibition. The artist isn't really my cup of tea, but Ma put me on the list".

So I knew I was already doomed to come along as soon as Paula opened her mouth. Whether my father's presence was a positive or a negative variable in this scenario, was unimportant in the grand scheme of things. I figured I could use a night out, and if I did not feel like facing him, I could simply avoid him. I assumed he would be swarmed by others all night, and there wasn't much likelihood of him recognizing me anyway. The last time he saw me I was three years old. When that's the age you're starting out with, twenty years will do better work than any surgeon in making you unrecognizable.

It was only as I already found myself in the midst of that room, that I really understood the gravity of what I had gotten myself into.

I did not have to look for him. As I had previously thought to myself, he was surrounded by adoring art enthusiasts, as well as equally adoring art professionals and journalists. I hadn't caught sight of him yet, and so I tried to drown my stupidity in the champagne, crossing my path at regular intervals.

"Oi, what about him?", Paula snuck up on me, poking at my side with a pointy elbow.

"Pardon?"

"That one over there.", she pointed using her chin. My eyes followed the gesture and came to rest on a handsome man with dark skin and a tightly cropped Afro. "You, or me?", Paula asked, not even bothering to hide that she had found something of far greater interest to her than the art on display. At her words, I looked at him with purpose. He did not notice, and I was glad for it. I would have been to drunk already to hide my embarrassment.

"Yours.", I stated definitively.

Paula let out a restrained squeal, squeezed my arm and strode towards him with the kind of confidence others envied her for. Left alone by her like that, my head turned, once again, to

where I knew my father to be. And against my own better judgement, I moved towards the crowd. I could say it was the alcohol, but that wouldn't be the truth. Like I said, I simply do not know. I heard him laugh before I saw him. I didn't think it was a genuine laugh, I would be proven right later on. As he laughed, the crowd laughed with him, shuffling about, as if to let the sound pass between them. This allowed me to sneak past some people in the back until I was just far enough ahead to spot him. He was stood next to a painting of what looked to be a dancing crowd, champagne glass in hand.

"Yes?", my father gestured at a young man at the front who had raised his hand.

"What does it take to be a good artist in your opinion?", he said.

My father nodded, "A good question.", he said, and as he was doing so, I could see the slightest tension in his jaw. And I knew he did not think it was a good question at all. And I hated that I knew, because my sister does that very thing, whenever she is displeased. I'm not even sure I was aware she does it until I saw him do the same.

"I would say, a good artist keeps working.", he said with a smile, after some consideration.

The people around me nodded as if he had said something else. Something meaningful.

Ignoring all of my instincts telling me to just walk away, I raised my hand. My father called on me with a nod of his head, and a slight raising of his glass. I could hear my blood rush and felt the thumping of my heart down into my fingertips. I had nothing to ask the artist, only questions for my father. He looked at me expectantly, along with everyone else.

"Was there anyone in particular who you would say impacted your work?", I finally forced my mind to push past my lips. It was the first thing I could think of, that didn't sound too much like what I had really wanted to ask. About my mother. About us.

He tilted his head ever so slightly. No tension in any part of his face.

"Yes.", he finally said with a pensive smile, an answer that caused the crowd around me to tremor with excitement, "I suppose everyone has that special someone, their muse. Most artists have more than one. I believe just as much as our time together shaped my art, so did the emotions that came after. Loss is a powerful tool when creating something. Guilt, regret, shame, all of these things. The things that move me have changed over the years, as has my art. A good question, I'll have to think on it some more.", he ended with an approving nod. I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat and returned the gesture. When he turned away to answer other questions, I ducked out of the crowd.

I couldn't leave, I could not have done that to Paula. I don't like leaving before she does.

The last time I did, her Uber driver put his hand on her leg. I could still see her chatting with the handsome man from earlier. It didn't feel right to interrupt her on account of my own

foolishness, so I walked over to a corner less populated than the others. The walls here were mainly hung with sketches and rough pencil drawings. Beautiful, but simple. Not nearly as captivating or awe inspiring as the paintings filling the remainder of the room.

But as I had nothing else to look at, and there was no one around but me and a security guard who gave me a nod when I looked his way, I decided to stay and take a closer look. My eyes wandered along the wall. Some of the sketches were colorized with oil paint, others with watercolours, and some were left plain.

Finally, much later than I should have in retrospect, I found my mother. She was placed at the very centre of the display, as I realized when I took a step back. Unlike with the other pieces, that hung tightly placed next to one another, there was space between her and the rest. As if all the other sketches were merely a frame for her.

I had seen some of my father's nudes before, a few were even part of the exhibition. But those were carefully curated fantasies. Individuals draped over furniture, sat up in sheets or standing, leaning against objects. Charged and erotic, always just tasteful enough to be shy of pornographic. This was nothing like those. This was intimate. Sensual.

My mother, sitting on the corner of a bed, legs pulled to her chest, arms holding her knees, her cheek resting on top of them, looking at the observer. No. Looking at my father.

Her hair is even shorter than it is now. It makes her look young and mature at the same time. I have seen photos of her hair like this, but I almost like it better here. My father tinted the sketch with pale, almost invisible watercolours. It looks right. Any more, and it would have drawn from the intended focus of the sketch. Oil would have certainly ruined it altogether.

"Ah, you've found her.", I flinched at the sudden sound of my father's voice. I had been so drawn in by the picture, I hadn't noticed him coming up behind me.

"What?", I said, caught off guard. My father used his eyes to point me at my mother.

"She is my favourite part of this exhibition. I knew she would be the least appreciated, but I don't mind.", he explained, a faint smile curling the corners of his mouth.

"Why?"

"Why what? I said a few things that question might apply to."

"Why don't you mind? Anyone would assume that an artist might feel insulted when people don't agree with him on his best piece."

"Oh, she's not my best, simply my favourite. Although coincidentally my best also depicts her."

Coincidentally, I thought to myself.

"I don't mind, because this way I get her all to myself. A little calm in this awful exhibition."

I looked at him surprised. “You don’t like it? I thought it’s fairly well done.”, I said.

“It is, but I don’t like exhibitions in general. Too many people. And they all want something from me. Want a piece of me to hold on to. Want to ask me stupid questions. Except you, I rather enjoyed yours. And now you have barged into my happy place.”, he finished his champagne and looked at me expectantly.

I said nothing, simply met his eyes. In case I had ever doubted it, I now knew for certain that I have my father’s eyes. The same reddish brown. They looked like mine, but they looked different on him. Maybe I really had been downplaying my own.

“Go on. Tell me I am being ridiculous and ungrateful. I am taking my fortune for granted. I am being dramatic, even for an artist.”, he said.

“I don’t think you are being ungrateful. I think you’re being human. That’s what an artist is supposed to be.”, I said. He looked almost taken aback. Then he laughed. Throwing back his head and showing his teeth as he did. He raised the hand in which he was still holding the champagne glass, and pointed at my mother.

“She would have liked you.”, he said, finally. Tears had formed in his eyes, and I was unable to tell which emotion had prompted them. It surprised me. How often do you get an outsider’s perspective on how your mother might regard you?

I couldn’t help but smile. “I will take that as a compliment.”, I said.

“You should, I meant it as such.”, he said with an earnest face, “Although she also liked me, so she might not have been an entirely infallible judge of character.”, he smiled.

“Well, sometimes it can be hard to relate to what others might see in us.”, I answered without thinking. I had not really felt the urge to comfort my father, but it didn’t feel wrong when I did. He nodded in agreement, “I suppose so.”, he said. And then, “What’s your name?”

“Adam.”

“How funny, we have the same name.”, he said with a grin.

“We do?”

“Same, but different.”, he shrugged.

I hadn’t considered that. I had instinctively given him my second name, out of fear he might have recognized the first.

“How so?”, I found myself asking.

“Different spelling, different pronunciation. But the meaning is the same. Same root.”, he said, trying to take another sip of his empty glass. He looked down at it with disappointment.

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked who she is.”, he changed the topic abruptly, pointing back at my mother. *I know who she is*, I wanted to say. But I didn’t.

“I figured you would tell me.”, I said.

“She is the answer to your question earlier. The one who has impacted my work the most.”

“Your muse?”, I teased, because I had found it ridiculous when he had referred to her as such. He looked at me with a serious face, then he gave a firm nod.

“Why didn’t you mention earlier, that you have pieces showing her on display here?”, I couldn’t help but express my confusion.

“Like I said, I like having her all to myself. Call it what you will. Possessiveness, or selfishness or arrogance. I don’t care. I don’t have much left of her, so I’ll take what I can get, and I’ll keep it all to myself if that means it will stay a little longer.”

“What happened?”, I did not have to ask. I know what happened, but it was the most likely question anyone who didn’t would want to know the answer to.

“I chose art, when I could have chosen her.”, he sighed, “She never condemned me for it. Never made any effort to make me feel guilty. She didn’t have to.”, his eyes rested on my mother, and he looked almost as if in a trance. “I robbed myself of her presence in my life, so I have no one else to blame. But the truth is that in spite of the pain I undoubtedly caused, I still think it was probably better this way. I would have been an unreliable companion, and a mediocre father.”, he snapped out of it and looked back at me. “And yet I cannot help but want her. I hate the thought of someone else touching her as I used to. I hate to think of my children being raised by a person who contributed nothing to bringing them into this world. I hate to think of someone else making them laugh. I hate to think that I didn’t even try. I hate that some part of me wishes for her to be alone, rather than finding joy in someone who isn’t me. I hate that I do not know who my children have become. But most of all I hate myself.”, his breath quivered as he inhaled, and his eyes looked glossy again. “I’m a fucking coward.”, he said much more quietly. I did not answer. Instead I turned to look back at the picture. She looked relaxed, at ease. It made me think me of her warmth. It made me miss who the woman in the picture would become.

“You look just like her.”, he finally broke the silence.

“Funny you should say that, I’ve always been under the impression that I look more like you.”

“You have my hair, and you have my eyes. And your face is almost entirely mine, although strangely enough I never liked it on me, but it suits you. But I could tell from the way you carry yourself. The way you talk. You might not see it, but there is far more of your mother in you, than there could ever be of me.”

I did not know how to answer. I stared ahead at my mother, while the thoughts raced inside my mind.

“You tighten your jaw, when you’re displeased.”, I pried my eyes away and looked at him, he was looking at me, waiting to hear what I had to say.

“Stella does the same thing. It’s how I know when I’ve messed up.”

He lifted his free hand to his chin, rubbing it absentmindedly.

“I’d never noticed.”, he said. “What’s she like?”, he focused back on me.

“Ambitious.”, is all I answered, as I faced my mother once again. A fixed point in my raging mind. Stella was not mine to give to him, I could not have taken that choice from her.

He realized that I would not go into further detail, and to his credit, he did not push.

“You want to know, don’t you? So, ask.”, I said sharply.

“Is she happy?”

It was not what I had expected from him, it seemed too simple a question after all that time.

“I think so.”, I said.

He nodded. I’m sure he wanted to ask more, but from the corner of my eye, I could see him turn to face my mother as well. Looking at the picture again, she had suddenly not seemed like my mother at all. So far away, so distant, and so different from the woman I knew. It was her, before she had become my mother, and therefore a complete stranger to me.

“There you are.”, I turned to see Paula walking towards us, “You’re finally getting out of here.”, she said and it did not take a genius to see her disappointment.

“What about your hot date?”

“A bore. If I wanted somebody’s opinion on the stock exchange, I’d ask my uncle Ernie. At least he has the decency to pay for my time. Got me the Cadillac last month, remember?”

“I remember. So that’s it for tonight then?”

“It is on my end, but don’t let me spoil your fun.”, she said, eyeing my father with a grin.

“Absolutely not. Let’s go, I’m famished.”, I turned to my father, unsure of what to do.

“Good bye Elio. I had a nice time talking to you.”, he offered me his hand, with just the slightest hesitation. I took it.

“Good bye.”

When we left the building, my knees buckled and Paula had to catch me with a surprised shriek. She set me down on the steps and after multiple assurances that I would not be getting any worse, she walked over to the Valet to get her car. Meanwhile, I tried to breathe in regular intervals, while I buried my face in my trembling hands. When I finally, actually felt like I wasn’t going to cry or vomit, or do both of those things, I pulled my phone from the inside of my suit jacket. After giving it some thought, I dialled my sister’s number. It rang twice, before the call was picked up.

“Elio?”, my mother’s voice inquired from the other end.

“Mama?”, I croaked. That was all I could get out, before the tears came, suffocating any words that my mouth might have still been able to form. My mother stayed silent for a moment, listening to the stifled sobs escaping my throat.

“Would you like to come home, dear?”. It took me a good five minutes, during which my mother waited patiently, before I finally gave her the answer, I hadn’t given in two years.

“Yes.”