

THE CRITIC CALEB ACKLEY

His fingers traced the outline of the fresh tattoo on his forearm. Flakes of dead skin drifted lazily to the ground as George's mind wandered. George. What a stupid name. It had 'history' his parents had said. 'Gravitas' was the word his aunt had used. She had been proud of that word. A large woman with a high forehead-an outer shell of self-importance matched in insignificance only by the smallness of her mental abilities. It seemed to be a family trait, this smallness and lack of depth. Thank God it wasn't hereditary, thought George. He would show them, in time, just how small they were.

His musings were cut short by the harsh blair of a spray-painted loudspeaker to his left. The room was small and crowded; everyone was within earshot. To a lesser mind, thought George, this artistic exercise would seem excessive. But not to him, no. To him the loudness spoke to so much more than this low-lit crowd of critics, artists, and generally well-dressed but sallow individuals. This was about protest, about art, about him. And he was here, he was one of them. Numbered among the chosen. A slow smile threatened to crack the solemn mask he had crafted in the mirror before arriving. George allowed it briefly, recomposing himself as he moved past the 'Study of Noise and Its Excesses' installation. Next was a large white canvas dotted here and there with black flecks of paint. His right arm began to itch again- he scratched. More dead skin fluttered to the concrete floor.

"It's about race," the high nasal voice came from behind him. Blaire was shorter than him and had a penchant for explaining things. She elbowed her way to where he was standing. "It's about race in America." George stared blankly-sunken cheeks looking especially hollow as he stared down his sharp nose at this small, loud woman by his side. She took his stare as her cue. "Representation is so important and we're just not seeing it. This culture is so vapid, we're still operating on 19th century principles in a 21st century landscape. This piece is so affecting." She took a sip of champagne. "What do you think about representation? What do you think about the piece?" George opened his mouth to respond, but she continued. "I like it because it says so much with so little. Only true artists ask their viewers to think for themselves. God, it really is amazing."

George swallowed what he had been about to say. She took another

sip of her champagne, looked over the canvas one last time with a calculated sigh equal parts boredom and socially-conscious discontent, and walked away with heavy footsteps. George watched her disappear into the mass of black. God, why did she have to stomp everywhere.

George's shoulders relaxed under the starched white of his crisply tucked t-shirt. He needed a drink.

"What is it even supposed to be?" The quiet voice startled George from the turbidity of his own thoughts.

"I'm sorry, what?" George turned as he asked the question. The man now standing at his side was shabby in appearance. Beard untrimmed, a slouchy grey wool something draped around his shoulders, he was squinting at the canvas that stood facing them.

"Oh, I just think it's funny." The man smiled to himself as he peered more closely. George didn't have time for this.

"What's funny?" George wasn't sure who had let this Intruder into the gallery. Didn't they have security?

"I've been listening," the Intruder said, shifting his focus to the crowded mass seething with drab turtlenecks and whispered conversation. "People are taking this so seriously, and it's just funny to me. I mean, honestly. All this over a few splatters of cheap black paint? How desperate do you have to be?"

George had had enough. Turning on his heel, he smoothed the crease that had formed across his spotless front. "Well, I suppose art isn't for everyone," he said over his shoulder as he moved towards the crowd.

At the bar, George shook off the exchange with the Intruder as his gin and tonic was handed to him. The gin softened the corners of his downturned mouth and he sat back on his stool, looking out over the shifting bodies.

"Isn't Jack just hilarious?" The whine of Blaire's unwelcome voice inserted itself again into his thoughts, sitting down heavily in his mind like a crude mug in a case of fine china.

George took a deep breath. "Who's Jack? I don't think I know anyone by that name."

"Oh come on. Jack! You know him, I saw you two talking together over by his piece!" George was caught off guard. That was the artist? That

sarcastic stranger with the smile and the fucking judgemental thoughts?

“I love Jack-he never takes things seriously. I was teasing him about it just last week when we were setting up lunch, I...” She stopped. Her companion was no longer sitting next to her. She scanned the crowd, then swiveled her chair back to face the bar. On her right another victim came within range. She pounced.

“Do you know Jack? I just adore his work, don’t you?”

George shouldered his way quickly through the sea of fallow faces and oily hair. His fists were clenched, knuckles whitening as Blaire’s carefully chosen words blazed through his mind like wildfire. He had to get outside. Walking quickly down the sidewalk, he gulped the biting air. How could he have been so stupid? Of course that was the artist. Who else would have possibly had the nerve to question the art AND the crowd? He was part of that crowd. The thought threatened to lead him down a dark hole. He banished it from his mind. Arriving at the driver’s side door of his chipped and rusting blue Mazda, parked a safe three blocks from the studio, George steadied himself-slowng his breathing as he clutched the door handle.

The engine shuddered as George mechanically wove through the familiar backstreets. He took himself through the exchange of words again, eyes staring blankly ahead of him as his hands guided the steering wheel. His tattoo itched.

Unlocking the door to his small apartment, he didn’t bother flicking the switch to turn on the naked bulb hanging from the low ceiling. He walked through the thick darkness, a well-worn path, and lowered himself onto the solitary mattress wedged into the far corner. It was a routine he practiced often. He never turned on the light if he could help it. The sight of the blank, dirty walls, the squat mini-fridge humming dully, and the mattress laying in the corner with its thin sheets made him want to scream. It was no home, just a place he went to sometimes. George assured himself that it was not an empty shell, but a stepping stone. He knew it was a lie.

Pulling out his phone, George quickly opened Instagram. His feed was flooded with images documenting the show he had just exited so quickly. These people with their champagne and their thoughts and their consciousness. It should be him in those photos. It WOULD be him in those photos. Finding Jack’s handle was simple, and George quickly began to compose the message. He scratched his arm as different phrases flitted across his mind. Finally, it was settled. Not over-apologetic but still honest. Just the right touch of humor in the post-script. Sent.

He sat hunched on the edge of the threadbare mattress expectantly. His arm no longer itched. It throbbed. His tattoo artist had warned him about the itching. George refreshed the bright screen. Still nothing. His brow furrowed in the pale glow cast by the smartphone. George laid back on the mattress, still holding the device close to his face. The creases under his eyes looked deeper in the unnatural light. His eyes ached. This, too- this sleeplessness under the

sickly patch of blue light in the cramped apartment-had become routine. George looked small as he curled his body around the phone, bringing his knees up to his chest as he lay on the twin mattress.

Refresh. Nothing. Scratch. Refresh. Refresh. Nothing. Scratch.