

WINNER OF THE SMITH/VERSACI EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD FOR FICTION

A VOICE WITHIN THE PAGES

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“Paul!”

Mr. Croft slammed the door behind him. The fire of his anger—not entirely at his wife but more the circumstance—was made all the more intense by the snow and frost that covered everything. But with every stomp through the deep snow, the flame dwindled, until there wasn’t even an ember to keep him warm. He adjusted the scarf over his mouth and nose before jamming his hands in his jacket pockets. His determined walking became labored trudging to the barn at the top of the hill—a journey that today felt like miles.

He shoved the barn door open. He took a small flashlight out of his pocket and swept the beam over the area—passing over tire tracks worn into the dirt, empty crates covered in webs, dusty hooks on the walls where tools hung years ago—before he found the switch.

He flicked it and pulled down his scarf as the bulbs in the barn popped and sputtered to life, casting a warm golden glow over the barn that made the dust and webs more inviting than they had any right to be. Mr. Croft pocketed the flashlight and went to a ladder that extended up to the darkened loft above. He began to climb, the creaking of his joints mimicked by the wood of the ladder.

At the top, a mottled blue curtain hung across the loft, creating a wall between it and the rest of the barn where none had been built. Folds of the fabric were joined by webs, the final rest of spiders that had long succumbed to the winter’s chill.

“I thought you liked it being open,” Mr. Croft had said as he screwed a hook into the ceiling.

“I did!” A young boy protested as he held the base of the ladder Mr. Croft stood on. “During the day,” he added.

“Well, if you’re still here in a few months we’ll take a trip into town,” Mr. Croft said. “We’ll buy some lumber from Mr. Fredrichs and make a proper wall, with your own door.”

“Really?” The boy gasped.

“It’d be a good learning experience!”

Mr. Croft was staring at his hand as if it wasn’t his own, wind whistling through the barn. He inhaled sharply and took off his gloves, sliding them into his back pocket before he went through the curtains.

Light filtered through the drape over the window. The bulb on the ceiling was dark, its chain shifting slightly in the air, disturbed by Mr. Croft’s entrance. He pulled it and the light bathed everything in a clinical fluorescence. There was the bed in the corner with green sheets, a green blanket, and even the wood frame painted green; the desk with books and trophies on it and a flag pinned to the wall; and the wardrobe.

“You’re really making your old man carry all this up here alone?” Mr. Croft had panted, leaning on the desk. The boy pointed at the opening where the window would be. Outside it was a sloping contraption that ran from the ground to the loft.

“You have that thing!”

“‘That thing’ is designed for hay, not the furniture of an eight-year-old boy. I don’t know how we’re going to get your dresser up.”

“Very carefully?”

A shiver coursed through him as he was brought back. He moved around the room as if in a daze. He sat on the bed and looked around the room. Posters and flags adorned the walls, along with drawings of flowers and animals. The artist varied in skill, but the corner was always signed with ‘P.C.’ and a date. Mr. Croft went to one of them: a drawing of a cat rendered in lifelike detail. Its head was tilted in what looked like curiosity. A glint in its eye made the expression look false, disguising a sly nature—as if it was pretending to not understand why you were angry your desk sported a new set of claw marks.

Written near the signature was ‘R.I.P.’ Mr. Croft gently took the drawing off the wall and set it on the desk.

He went to the wardrobe and opened its doors.

Clothing of every color hung from the bar. He thumbed through the shirts and pants, stopping every once in a while as a flash of emotion jolted through him at some half-recalled memory. He stopped at a suit jacket.

“Back by 10,” Mr. Croft had said.

“11,” the boy—now a teenager—haggled. He was dressed in a black suit and white shirt, with a dazzling green bowtie. They stood on the ground floor of the barn beside a car as the boy twirled the keys in his hand. “They’re going to the ice cream shop afterward and I want to go.”

“Sometimes you don’t get to do what you want, you do what I want.”

“C’mon, dad. You don’t trust me?”

“You I trust.”

The boy rolled his eyes. “I’ll be back by 11. If I’m not, call the police.”

“You know your mother worries.”

The boy opened the car door, creating a barrier between himself and his father. “Are you sure it’s just her?”

Mr. Croft slammed the wardrobe shut, holding the doors closed like they might open by themselves. He breathed a heavy sigh.

He saw something green underneath the wardrobe. It was a folder labeled ‘self-portraits.’ He was surprised at the fear that grew in him as he stared at the handwritten title. He shook his head and opened it.

It was a child’s drawing of a person spiky hair, with ‘Age 3’ written in much neater handwriting than the large PETER underneath the figure. Under that was ‘Age 5,’ much more colorful and only a bit neater. The portraits were annual after that, the style and skill growing and changing over the years, along with his features. At 9, he bore round glasses. At 12, freckles had been rendered along with them. At 14, he had a red scratch on his cheek. His hair was buzzed short, and a bit of fuzz covered his chin. At 16, Mr. Croft gasped—the drawing was realistic in the extreme. Every freckle was captured, every bump of the scratch that became a scar on his cheek.

Mr. Croft sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Age 16, the last in the artist’s collection. He shut his eyes and saw flashes of a meadow with the boy running through it, or dipping his toes in a stream, or climbing a tree, with not an ounce of snow in sight. The wind rustled through the leaves as birds sang for him. It was warm and green, and he could feel the sun on his skin.

He opened his eyes. The room was colder and darker. He pulled the drape back to see the landscape buried in snow. It was overcast now too, making a seamless white from earth to sky. He pulled open a desk drawer and took a leather-bound journal out of it. Opening it gingerly, he only saw a flash of handwriting inside before he snapped it closed again. He fell onto the chair and held the journal to his face.

The little boy had opened his gift, and found a book with no title and no text on any of the pages. “What is it?”

“A journal,” said Mrs. Croft. “You can do whatever you want with it!”

“We have a tradition in our family,” Mr. Croft elaborated. “We keep diaries, so that those who come after us know where they came from.”

The boy frowned. “Who comes after us?”

“One day you’ll have children of your own,” said Mrs. Croft.

“Oh.” A black and white cat hopped up onto the couch beside him, settling itself in the boy’s lap. “Can I have cats instead?”

His parents laughed. “If you want,” said Mrs. Croft.

Mr. Croft set the journal on the dusty desk and opened it, reading the

words of a young child. As he got deeper and deeper, he began hearing a voice within the pages. In one breath the voice was laughing, and in another it was on the brink of anger and sorrow, before the next a relaxed exhale. It spoke of birthdays, plants it had learned the names of, species of birds it had spotted, of dreams and aspirations. It spoke of friends new and old and lost, of fun and heartbreak.

As the voice grew more articulate, it mused on the nature of the world and the people in it, and the voice’s place there. It whispered about battles and wars, explosions and gunfire in places too near; quiet, so no one could hear the worry and fear.

Then, the voice stopped.

The page, and every one after, was blank.

“—and then we’re going to the Museum of Natural History, and then—”

“Have fun,” Mr. Croft said, patting his son on the shoulder as they stood in front of a school. “And stick with the group—don’t want you getting lost in a big city alone.”

“I will,” said the boy, a teenager with pierced ears and a scar on his cheek. “I mean—I won’t get lost, because I’ll stay with the group. Though I guess if the group gets lost, then...” The boy laughed.

His mother laughed too. “Have lots of fun. Draw lots. And when you get back, write all about it!”

“I will!” He adjusted his backpack and started toward the bus. “See you later! Love you!”

“Love you!”

Mrs. Croft stood on the porch of the farmhouse, stone-faced and resolute in her snow jacket as she watched her husband return from the barn.

“I had half a mind to come after you,” she chided as he climbed up the steps, breath crystallizing in the air. “It’s time, isn’t it? To make peace?”

Wordlessly he handed her the folder titled self-portraits, keeping the journal safely tucked away.

She looked between him and the folder a moment before leafing through the drawings. Her countenance softened, and she stopped at Age 16—the last in the series. She covered her mouth with her gloved hand. “Paul,” she whispered.

He hugged her tightly.

“It’s not supposed to be this way,” she said, voice wavering. “How are we supposed to...” she trailed off.

“I don’t know.”

They held each other on the porch, desperate for some kind of warmth. All they could find were the faded embers in each other. Despite the frigid wind and frozen snow, the long blizzards and heavy storms, the ashes still smoldered. For now, it was enough.