<http://www.livingartscentre.ca/gallery>

by

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The entrance was marked by two large doors. They stood floor to ceiling, with clear glass that one could see through. The curator fumbled in his pant pocket for the solitary key. It would have been faster to just yank on the lanyard and pull the whole thing out. The key fob had a passcard attached to it, along with the key. The curator silently admonished himself for taking so long to fetch the key. He had done this enough times that he could do this with his eyes closed. Yet, here he stood, in front of the art gallery doors.

The lock was always tricky for him. The tumbler clicked as he turned the key, and yet he was always uncertain if the door was unlocked or not. Finally the door opened with a bit of a push, enough force to rattle the glass door slightly.

The curator searched for the light switch. Most of the lights came on at once. A few flickered and the curator made a mental note to bring fresh bulbs and a ladder during his next round.

He slowly moved from one exhibit to the next. It was part of his routine to make sure everything was what it should be. He started to turn around to head back towards the front doors. One of the lights flickered on and off for a brief moment. In that briefest of moment, when the lights were off, he noticed the trace of fluorescent after-glow near the frame of the painting just under the light. He thought his eyes were playing tricks with his mind.

He waited for the light to flicker. There it was again. Angry that a vandal would do this, the curator walked to the front desk, looking for the blue light flash light he kept in the bottom drawer.

He turned off all the lights. He shone the blue light along the wall where he first noticed the after-glow...nothing. He walked all the way to the back, turned around and shone the blue light again.

The curator could not believe his eyes. The after-glow was only visible from the back of the gallery, when looking towards the front. This might not be vandalism after all. It was something that confused him and yet, it also intrigued him.

The markings looked like directions or instructions or pieces of a puzzle or a message. He traced his hand over the markings, hoping that would somehow reveal their meaning to him.

The curator became uneasy as the realization hit him. Who was this meant for? How long had this been here, waiting to be discovered? More importantly, what was his part in all of this? He was the only person whose routine would bring him here at night, at this time…

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Julian had been visiting the art gallery every day for almost three weeks now. Most days, he would just sit on one of the benches outside, monitoring the number of visitors arriving and leaving, noting the peak times.

Julian had been inside the gallery six times during the three weeks. It was small gallery with about twenty exhibits. From the front desk, the staff on duty could see everything. Julian had verified that vantage point already, when the staff had got up to answer questions from a patron, that day when Julian was loitering near the entrance. It had only cost Julian $20 on that wager with the art student that the staff couldn’t be stumped with questions on a particular painting.

The gallery’s layout was too “open concept” for Julian to complete his mission during the day. Julian would have to do this when no one was around. He would need at least twenty minutes, judging by the locations of the exhibits and the positions of the lights.

The gallery was closed at 6 pm. The building, the gallery was in, was opened until 10 pm. A quick search on-line told Julian that there were classes conducted in the various rooms throughout the building. The earliest start time was 6 pm; the latest was at 8.

After a few phone calls, Julian found the courses he was looking for that could put him closest to the gallery at night. The dancing class gave Julian the opportunity to move around the building almost at will. The drawing class allowed him to observe the gallery through the window of his classroom. It took just two classes, for these two courses, for Julian to get the night curator’s routine.

It had amused Julian initially, how the curator always fumbled for the key and then with the glass door, every night. The curator’s frustration was obvious to anyone watching. Now, this was just pathetic. Julian was having a hard time reconciling his impression of the curator with what little he had been told. The curator was supposed to have a brilliant mind.

Last night, Julian received the latest report from the surveillance team. It was a conversation between the curator and his granddaughter. She was starting her summer break three weeks earlier than anticipated. Julian would have to complete this part of his mission by next week, at the latest.

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Julian sat in the classroom, waiting patiently for the instructor to arrive. About half of the class was already chatting with each other, about their homework or assignment pieces, when the instructor stepped into the classroom. It was just after 7 pm. The class always started with a brief recap of the previous week and followed by anything that anyone saw or read that they would want to share with the class from that past week.

Julian had to wait a little while longer...leaving too early might draw undue attention to himself. Julian was just vaguely aware of the conversation around him. His mind was occupied, visualizing his mission. He looked at his watch, it was just past 7:30. Julian was about to excuse himself when the instructor called the class to attention.

“Everyone, we’re going on a field trip tonight. Bring along a pen or pencil, and paper or notebook to take notes.”, the instructor said.

“Where are we going?”, asked that woman who was working at a book store. She was always the first to speak, to volunteer, to ask questions… Julian couldn’t remember her name just then, his train of thought was interrupted by the instructor’s announcement. This part of the mission had to be accomplished tonight.

“We’re going to the art gallery.”, said the instructor.

Julian did his best to hold his composure; he looked at his hands, hoping they would not shake and draw attention to himself…