A Toast to Art

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Applause echoed off the arcing gallery ceiling and drifted into silence as the speaker cleared his throat.

"And now we have come to the last set of paintings in the John Handler III Talent Exhibit. Before us we have the finest art work in the show, a collection entitled "Shadows" created by Mark Costlings, a senior from our very own Fairview High School." The stout man paused as he glanced at the crowd surrounding him with a pleased look on his face. Mark's hands felt sweaty and his heart beat drummed against his stiff suit.

"After reviewing hundreds of applicants from all over the state, the judges have selected this collection based on a vigorous criteria including design, style, artistic expression, originality, and professionalism and found it to their unanimous choice in excellence..." His deep voice continued in a seemingly endless drone of praise, but the words floated past Mark's ears. His eyes averted the looks of the people he knew must be looking at him and centered on his favorite painting. A morose girl sat huddled under a barren tree crying in the rain. With one foot hanging limp in the gloomy brook and her painful eyes staring right back at him. It was done almost entirely in grey undertones. He remembered all the nights he had spent in his room studying her face trying to get every detail just right. Nights spent with a bottle of Vodka stashed behind his easel, his radio cranked, and his mother pounding on the door. He looked to his left at his mother now standing beside him in her favorite light blue dress, her hands clasped. Her calm face beamed in a maternal smile--for once she looked proud. His thoughts were interrupted by a wave of thunderous applause and he jerked back into reality. The mayor was stepping down from the platform, his plump hand extended and grasped his in a firm handshake.

"Congratulations, Mark!" His politician's smile froze on his face for an instant as the press snapped pictures and blinded Mark's somewhat bewildered eyes with flashes. "So, how does it feel, Sonny-boy?" the mayor winked. "Just think--your works exhibited at a gallery in Chicago. Not bad, eh? And the scholarship should help you get into the Art Institute!"

"It feels great," Mark managed to mumble out. "Just great."

After the eternally long reception filled with artists, spectators, and big-wigs milling around chatting with wine glasses in hand, it felt good for Mark to be in the solitude of his room. He could wipe off his "Yes-I'm-Mark-Costlings-Why-thank-you-for-the-compliment" smile and replace it with a sincere one. The reality of his good luck started to sink in. He now had a real chance of getting into the top art school and being able to
afford it. Finally his future seemed certain, his dreams possible. Maybe things would keep on getting better for him—it was the only direction to go. He recalled his worst points at the bottom, in his junior year. He had been drinking a lot at parties. In fact, he drank all the time with friends, before school, even by himself. The turning point came the day after a wild Sunday night party when he attempted to go to class and had passed out in the hall. There was so much of that year he couldn’t remember. He could recall fragments, sitting in English class, working on his paintings, throwing up at a homecoming party, his mother nagging him to death. But mostly it was blank. Mark knew he didn’t really have a drinking problem. He wasn’t a dirty, unshaven wino, he didn’t go around running down people in a car or having violent rages or anything outrageous like that. He would just get a little stressed out about his mom and her attitude (“Where have you been?” “Why don’t you ever talk to me?” “Clean that room!”), or grades, or just things that got on his nerves. There was nothing wrong with going out and drinking with the boys. They always had a great time and it made him feel better.

He flopped down on his unmade bed and a smile of happiness spread across his face. His paintings had won first place. And he, Mark Costlings, from a nowhere smalltown, was going to have a showcase in Chicago. He immediately understood the high a writer feels when he gets published or when an actor makes Broadway. His work had touched other people and been acknowledged. He hadn’t felt this good about himself in years. He was going somewhere; finally, he was going to be a somebody. Mark sprang off his bed, into his closet and slid into his faded jeans, a sweat-shirt, and punched out Andy’s number on the phone. He was going to celebrate.

"Hey, can I have a word with man of the hour?" Andy yelled jovially over the blaring rock beat and loud chatter and laughter. Through the mass of people partially blurred by clouds of cigarette smoke and the effects of eight beers, Andy spotted Mark sitting with his arm around Christie talking to several people. Christie saw him looking from the kitchen doorway. "You mean this artist guy?" she joked. She nudged Mark, "You’re wanted in the kitchen."

"I’ll be right back, Chris." Mark stood up a little unsurely and made his way towards Andy who was downing number nine.

Andy, Carl, and Steven stood somberly in the kitchen amidst empty beer cans and potato chip bags.

"What’s up?" Mark asked, wary of their attempt to seem serious.

"We, your dearest friends," Andy said in mock dignity, "have come together to present these to you for your outstanding abilities."

Carl stepped forward and handed him two bottles of Cold Duck and began to laugh. "And we expect you to share with us in your good fortune!" The boys grinned.
"Easily done, my friends." Mark obliged by popping the cork. Each toasted "To Art!" before guzzling out of the bottle. Soon a dozen other party-goers had joined in the toasting and the wild dancing.

Two bottles later plus a fifth of Jack Daniels, the party had thinned out and Mark felt fairly numb. It was nearly 3 a.m. The phone was in a container of melted vanilla ice cream. The chess players held court in teeming ashtrays. Someone had thrown up in the fireplace. Steven had long since passed out on the couch. Mark felt close to joining him. Christie had said goodbye to the last of the guests, leaving Mark, Chad, Andy, and herself as the only ones, conscious, anyway, in the house.

"You know, it's really a shame that I didn't get to see your paintings in the show. They get shipped off to Chicago tomorrow, don't they?" Andy mumbled from an easy chair.

"Yeh, it's too bad. I can't believe that my work is going to Chicago." Actually, Mark couldn't believe how drunk he was.

"Hold on," Carl said as he tossed cigarette butts into a bowl on the coffee table. "I never got to see them either. The exhibit is at the Auditorium, right? All we'd have to do is drive over and I could kick in that old back door the janitor uses..."

"You've got to be kidding!" Christie interrupted.

"No, I'm not joking. It'd be easy. Sneak in, take a look--no harm done."

Carl grabbed his coat quickly as if afraid he might lose his inspiration and pulled Mark to his feet. Andy already had his car keys in hand. "Let's go!"

"You guys are crazy!" Christie laughed in utter disbelief. "At least be careful driving..."

But they were gone. Andy gunned the engine of his old Buick and sped off. Mark sat in the backseat trying not to let himself fall over. Was this real? He heard his voice join in with Andy and Carl as the radio ground out a tune. Street lights zoomed past his head.

The car had stopped. Andy pulled him into the night air. "Come on, man, wake up or you're gonna miss out!" Carl had kicked open the door and disappeared in the darkness. Mark and Andy followed. "Helllooo" Andy's howl bounced throughout the huge room. "Anybody home?" Someone turned on a flashlight. Mark concentrated on following the spasmodic circle of light. Their footsteps scraped against the tile floor. Someone was running. Carl's laugh swirled around him. Soon Andy was running, pulling Mark along in and out, weaving like skiers on a slalom course. Mark's hands reached out as if to grab something. He laughed. His arms knocked against things. Long strips of wood. The shatter of ceramics and the hollow sound of canvas ripping. "What was ripping?" floated in his mind. Carl had punched a painting; he held a piece of it in his hand. Mark stared. Andy lit an end with a lighter. They laughed. Mark knew it must be a dream now. He held a sketch in his hand, twisted into a kind of torch. Each of them
had a torch. Their halos of orange light followed them on their rampage. Figures thrown, ribbons pulled. Up the stage, down again. Mark breathlessly halted, his torch burning low, in front of his pictures. The gold lettering on his ribbon still sparkled. His smile faded. Andy jogged up behind him. Carl followed with one last screeching cry that grated against their ears long after they were silent. His evil grin faded when he saw his friends' expressions. They were pale in the flame. They stood for a moment, huffing and wheezing, looking into the sad girl's eyes. "For shame, for shame you cruel, drunken boys," she seemed to mock.

Carl coughed uneasily. "So, this is really excellent, Mark. It looks, um, really real."

Mark did not move. Andy shuffled his feet, "What are we doing? What in the world have we done?" He ran his fingers through his spiked hair.

"We came to see Mark's paintings." Carl stated dryly. "Now we've seen them. Let's get out of here." Tossing his torch aside he walked angrily towards the door like a spoiled child having his day at the zoo ruined by a sudden thunder-storm. Andy stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. He was debating on whether to cry or not. "Jesus, look what we've done!" he whined over and over to himself. "We're gonna get caught, I know it!"

"Shut up, Andy, it's too late now." Carl stood in open doorway. There was a slant of sky behind him and the night stars shone. He lit a cigarette and turned away. Andy followed, head bent, to avoid seeing the wreckage. Mark tried to turn away from her sunken watery eyes but couldn't. She was crying but not tears of sadness. They were bitter, angry, resentful tears that must have stung her cheeks. To escape, Mark closed his eyes for a moment and hummed as though it were all a nasty bad dream. He would open his eyes and it would be all gone....

He heard a crackling sound. Like snapping twigs. What was Carl doing now? He didn't want to see. The noise changed, and he smelled smoke. His eyes sprang open to see a whole section on his left in flames. "Carl's torch," he thought. The flames lapped in waves over frames, stands, canvases. They nibbled at the stand near his feet. Soon the frame, the girl was surrounded in an inferno. The pouring rain and her tears were not enough to drench the red tongues ripping at her calico dress. And still her eyes looked at him. "I'm sorry," he heard himself say. "I'm so damn sorry I couldn't save you, little girl." But her hands, her face, even her searching eyes had turned to black ash.

"Oh my God, Mark!!" Andy yelled as he ran towards the transfixed figure. "Get out!!" He roughly grabbed his arm and dragged him out. Andy's heart began to panic. Cops. Police. Firemen. They would be here. I have to get out. His thought of action was confused.

"Get in the car!" Carl screeched in desperate anger. "Get us away from the scene!!"
In the car. Start the car. Drive. Drive. Slowly, Andy returned to his senses. He pulled off near the city park. Carl sat in the passenger's side staring out the window. Andy ran his hands through his hair and wiped his mouth.

"We're safe," Andy sighed. "Are you okay, Carl?"

"Yeah," he grunted.

"Are you alright, Mark? Mark?"

"Oh, great. I think he's, like, gone into shock or something," Carl sneered.

Andy leaned over the back seat and looked at Mark. He looked at his feet. Concern turned into a stifled laugh. He snickered.

"What's so funny?" asked Carl.

"Look...look at his shoes. They've melted." Andy laughed out loud. "He looks like he has jelly shoes!"

Carl looked. Both of them laughed. The tension eased off their faces. "That was quite a scare, man," Carl said. "But not enough to go comatose, Mark. Can't you see it's all right now?"

Mark couldn't see anything but eyes. Her deep hateful eyes.

The boys had unwound. "Wasn't that one hell of an experience?" Carl marvelled.

"It sure was," Andy agreed shakily.

Carl had found another bottle of JD in the glove compartment. He took a swig and passed it to Andy.

"Want some, Mark?" he asked.

Mark only wanted to stop seeing her eyes. He wanted to erase forever the flames he saw raging over the canvas. Burning the river, burning her delicate face. Burning his dreams.

Carl and Andy were laughing.

"Nothing like good ol' JD to soothe the nerves," Andy said.

"I agree one hundred percent!" Carl raised the bottle and toasted, "TO ART!"

"Yes, to art!"

Mark leaned weakly to one side, opened the door and vomited into the gutter.

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