

The Marble Woman

Day 1

Sound waves are still dancing in his ears when he wakes up, cheeks cold on the marble floor. His fingers twitch, looking for anything to grasp, and he realizes that his hands are coated with a thin layer of gray powder. He rises on all fours, coughing up all the dust from his lungs as the ceiling continues to shower down rubble. Silence permeating the thick air, the artist examines his new studio. The safest place he has ever known, after being swept by catastrophe, is now in ruins.

Limping on his left leg, he discovers what little remains of the door leading into his home kitchen. He draws in a sharp breath remembering his mother lying alone in bed on the third floor. She must be making her homemade quilts rise and fall with her rhythmic breath, sound asleep and oblivious to the disaster. He tries slamming his body against the door without success. There is no other exit.

A half baguette bathing in a day-old soup bowl along with two bottles of water salvaged from previously unexplored corners of the basement: this is all the company the artist has. He sits cross-legged on the ground and recalls what happened during the earthquake. He was adding finishing touches to a commissioned portrait when the light bulb overhead started swaying as if hypnotizing him. In a trance, he must have been unaware of the rumbles that followed immediately. His collapse was all part of the ritual, the dance of praise for the staggering light above. He had no thought for his mother then.

In the lonely dark, in the cold, he sits. A second is a minute is an hour. He screams.

Day 2 - *hands*

He has not moved. Chills race down his spine as he realizes there is no help coming soon. Awake and asleep, living and dreaming— all the same black solitude. When his eyelids drape over his sight, the darkness is a night sky with stars shining in every corner. He desires only one thing. The artist stands up and scrambles to the closet full of unfinished works. He can only navigate between the canvases and sculptures with his hands lingering in the air, tracing the outline of any object that comes under his fingers. The statue is not hard to find. He gently takes the marble woman in his arms and returns back where he was sitting.

Her presence seems to light up the room immediately. The ivory sheen shimmering from her every angle enchants him to smile, and the artist finds the chisel and mallet already in his hands. He brings them up to the surface and begins working, the motion becoming more and more familiar with each chip. When was the last time? Three

or four years ago, probably. Before his mother gave in to old age and her bedroom became her entire world.

He starts with the hands, which is unusual. But this is not an ordinary sculpture. The woman's glow beckons him to move onward, and the artist obeys her implicit command. The chisel moves along the lines of her fingers that are resting on her chest. Her arms are crossed with her left shoulder tilted slightly upward. The statue strikes a pose of self-adoration, but not vanity; rather, she revels in the joy of being young.

When he first attempted to carve this sculpture, he simply wanted to embody youthfulness. Then the artist stopped and buried it in the corner of a closet when he failed to find enough inspiration to keep on going. Now the statue symbolizes hope and unending light for him in this desolate basement. His rough hands smooth the curves of the cream marble, each movement of the chisel revealing the image of his mother.

Day 4 – *legs*

The artist is fixated on the statue in every waking hour; even when he is nibbling on the baguette at a glacial pace to conserve food, his eyes are looking at the only woman he has ever known.

He has long forgotten about the sunlight, as there are no windows in the basement, but the statue is more than enough for him. She is all-present, her radiance soaking into every part of his being. With every moment that passes, his fears fade away into the darkness around him. He was alone until he found the statue.

After finishing the hands, he has moved on to the legs. He thinks about how his mother's legs once stood as strong and firm as her commanding personality. The artist's legs are shaking as he works on the statue, but he is too immersed in the beauty of the sculpture to notice. When he offers his heart to the marble woman, she blesses him in return with strength to remain on his feet.

Day 6 – *hair*

The artist has never dared to come near the flakes of gold he received as a present from one of his supporters at an exhibition, but he knows that the time to use them is now. After retrieving glue and a brush, he sits down before the sculpture and leans her head against his legs. With the bristles of his brush, he lets the glue trickle down the cascades of hair flowing down the sculpture's shoulders. The artist immediately sprinkles her hair with gold, and her golden curls shine with newfound exuberance. He lets out a gasp of wonder. He imagines how his mother's hair must have flown in the wind, how her blonde waves must have danced in the breeze.

There is no more hunger for food or the outside the world. The marble woman is his sun and companion in the unforgiving solitude.

Day 8 – *eyes*

He cannot tell if a month or a single day has passed since the earthquake. No matter how long it has been, the artist knows it is time for the statue to be completed. His throat is dry and his legs cannot stop shaking. He is leaving to join the stars, but only after he finishes the sculpture. His shaking hands search for two diamonds in the same cupboard where he kept gold flakes. After a running his hands a few times down the shelves, the artist knocks over an object that uncovers two dazzling rainbows piercing through the darkness. Letting out a cry of joy, he picks up the diamonds, each one as big as a blueberry.

She is waiting. With a thundering heart, he kneels before her with jewels in hand. The two craters in her almond eyes are yet to be filled; the artist inhales deeply and presses the gems into her eyes. She is complete. The woman shimmers more brilliantly than ever before, and the artist falls backward. His eyes are searching the gray walls surrounding him as he did when he first woke from the disaster. He sees ethereal stars dancing in the darkness. Two of them grow bigger and bigger, and soon his mother's diamond eyes are smiling at him. He sighs in relief, and silence unfolds over the darkness.

Day 9

It is only now that the rescuers are reaching this part of town after the earthquake. They did were not even aware that this area had been so heavily damaged until the second report came in. The six men trudge through the streets until they stop before a house that took a particularly heavy hit. Amazingly, the front door survived, and the men walk in curiously. Shielding their heads from falling debris, they are surprised to see that the staircase remains after the destruction. The wooden boards underneath their feet creak as they climb up the steps. The leader of the rescue team wonders out loud, "If there was anyone here, do you think they'd be in the bedroom?" A murmur of "maybe" spreads through the rest of the group, and the men continue walking upstairs.

When they reach the third floor, the rescuers see that all bedroom doors are open except for one. The leader slowly turns the door handle on the closed door and lets it swing open. In the darkness, an old woman is hunched over something on the ground, and she is rocking back and forth in a steady rhythm. There is no window or overhead

light in the room. The rescuers rush around her, and one of them shouts, “Are you alright?”

She offers no response except for a faint smile, and the men follow her loving gaze to the ground where a marble statue lies. He is a middle-aged man with cream skin and golden mane and diamond eyes. The woman gently rubs the eyes of the statue, the diamonds shining more brilliantly at her touch. The glow of the statue spreads throughout the room.

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