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The Gift

David Sula
College of DuPage

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The buzzing air conditioner dangling in the upper corner of the large tiered classroom blasted Thomas's back with continuously unpredictable sporadic puffs of chill. He coughed to suppress a shiver, and he curled his fingers into fists, digging his nails into his palms to distract his impatient brain from his discomfort. A forced smile helped mask his eagerness to end this frigid hell. He wished the goosebumps dotting his arms were as easy to conceal. Every tiny hair on Thomas's arms and legs stood on end as though subjected to static charge.

Caleb's head poked out from behind an enormous canvas in the middle of the room. His brow wrinkled in consternation as his eyes darted from his painting to his model and back again.

His lip curled down in a frown. "Hmm."

"Something wrong?" Thomas asked. He worried that the opportunity to clothe himself had been delayed yet again. He had already been on display for over an hour, propped up on this icy metal stool with every inch of skin exposed. They were alone in the lecture hall—Caleb reserved it for privacy—but even in isolation with the narrow windows of the doors taped over with black garbage bags, Thomas felt awkward and vulnerable to be naked in a classroom.

Caleb stroked his chin as he doubted what he'd painted so far. "Your legs look weird."

"Gee, thanks." Thomas glanced down at his hairy shins, knobby knees, and disgustingly pronounced calves.

"I mean in the painting, babe. It looks off." He did that painter thing where he extended his arm and toggled the angle of a thumb's up.

"Need another set of eyes?" Thomas hoped desperately for a 'yes' so that he could demount from the uncomfortable seat.

His frigid butt cheeks were falling asleep. He wondered what sort of fiendish miser running the art department was responsible for supplying metal stools for nude models.

“No, no. Stay there.” Caleb took a step back, tilted his head, and grimaced. “If we’re made in God’s image, He did not like artists.”

With a sigh, he dipped his brush back into the tan plop of paint on his palette and resumed his work. Thomas’s smile wavered. He wished he could rub his arms and enjoy a few fleeting moments of friction warmth. This was such a stupidly long process. Why couldn’t Caleb have just taken a quick photograph for reference? He thought bitterly. This seemed unnecessary. If Thomas had known ahead of time how long he would be perched in this pose, he would have...well...he wouldn’t have made a different decision, but he would have certainly voiced concerns and maybe requested they do this in a warmer room. Why couldn’t Caleb be like other boyfriends and have a birthday that could be mollified with dinner and a show, a nice new shirt, or a T. Swift CD? No, Caleb had to be married to his art, leaving Thomas less as a boyfriend and more as whatever the male equivalent of a mistress was.

Thomas tried not to be bothered too much by that. He knew how important painting was to his boyfriend. The last thing Thomas wanted was to pressure his partner to spend more time with him at the expense of his craft, but it seemed like Caleb spent so much time painting in the various campus art studios. Sometimes it forged a strain, but art came first. Thomas knew that when they started seeing each other, and he wanted to be supportive.

Now that supportiveness was coming back to bite him. When Thomas had asked Caleb what he wanted for his birthday, he excitedly exclaimed without a moment’s hesitation, “I want to paint you.” Thomas had agreed to it through a smile of clenched teeth. He tried to think of it as being brought into Caleb’s world, as a chance to spend time together and support his boyfriend’s painting, but it didn’t come without its own set of unpleasanties. Thomas thought back to before he started dating Caleb how mortified he would have been just to share a dick pic on dating apps. When this was all over, he would have to come to terms with his full bare body, and all of its accompanying flaws, being immortalized in acrylics. It wouldn’t just be a few hundred pixels that could be hidden away

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on a phone. It would be on the largest sized canvas that the school allotted to grad students, possibly in a gallery or at the very least his boyfriend's portfolio.

When Thomas had first walked into the art studio earlier, clutching his robe tightly around himself, he had been struck with horror to see just how big the canvas was. Thomas did his best to keep stifling his anxieties and discomforts, both physical and emotional, as Caleb, brushstroke by brushstroke, created a nearly full-sized mimic of him. For all the cold and muscle stiffness, the worst was yet to come. By the time this was over, Thomas would face this acrylic reflection of himself, and unlike the mirrors he so often frowned at, he'd have to grin and lie and say this looked good because even if the craftsmanship was as excellent as what Caleb usually produced, at the heart of it all, the subject matter would be something Thomas would be unable to not loathe.