

Museum Guard

by Rachel Lora Simmons

Ice. The floor was cold like ice. Smelled like it too, like ice from an ice tray which has retained the plastic smell of its former cubicle (yet the floor was marble). There was the faint smell of dirt, or dust, though there was none - absolutely not a speck - to be seen, or even felt, as Kathleen (Cory) pushed her finger around in circle, then reverse circle. Semi-circle.

She looked straight across towards the wall and saw shoes. They were orthopedic, and beigey gray, and belonged to the panty-hose clad legs of the museum docent. Curious, she thought, how she makes the same "wah wah wah" sound that Charlie Brown's teacher does (it was late autumn and she had recently viewed "Charlie Brown and the Great Pumpkin.")

Cory pushed her finger towards the pool of nude collected around the docent's ankles, blinking one eye shut, then the other, so that the feet flashed in movement. This was such a big museum.

She looked up, following nylon up into the thick of dull, woolen skirts.

If you had told her that in fifteen years, she herself would be standing as tall as the docent - no, taller - in the same museum, only, wearing bike shorts and purple tights, she would have said, stop. And shut your mouth.

Or maybe not. She *had* always liked colors.

Vagina. She had just learned that word.

She had one. Did the old-lady docent have one too?

She couldn't see. If she - the docent - had one, it was hidden in skirts, and wool, and nylon.

The docent was talking about something though, about the man she was standing next to, the man they were all gathered around.

Solid, black leather shoes, with meticulous laces. Stolid, also.

They weren't real leather.

Black - or was it navy - trousers - ha, trousers. Cory had just learned that old-fashioned word, and - correctly - assumed its usage was justified here.

When they arrived at the museum that morning, marching ants off a school bus, they gathered in a herd of black coats around the reflecting pool that graced the museum entrance. Long, rectangular, it reminded Cory of a, yes, that was it, an infinity pool, like one she had seen on vacation with her family. She hadn't been allowed in. She touched the steely surface of the pool and watched the water ripple out.

"You're not supposed to be doing that."

Cory looked up slowly to see a boy - her age, but smaller - standing in front of her, with an admonishing look, as he unwrapped a blue gumball from its cellophane.

"I can touch the water if I want," was her reply.

"No, no, it's a museum, we can't touch anything here."

"Would you touch the drinking fountain?" she asked.

The boy smirked. "Public facilities don't count."

Cory looked around. "Which school are you from?"

"Brookwood Elementary," the boy said. He crinkled the cellophane wrapper into his coat pocket, and thumbed the gumball in his hand. "Warming it up," he said.

"I bet you're not supposed to chew gum inside," she said.

Hands folded, mottled, like the docent's, the guard's palms were grasping each other in alert relaxation - as a ballerina in first position. They were centered directly below two silver buttons, directly below a vertical tie, knotted square. Cory hadn't watched the docent's face, but she watched the guard's now, his old man's mouth down-turned, not frown-like, but as though he suffered from an under-bite. Horn-rimmed glasses shielded his eyes, and a dapper

cap was pulled down over his forehead. His badge was shiny over his heart.

He wasn't real.

As the docent gestured, he stood still. Hands, still resting, frown, still turned down.

He wasn't real.

"Yeah, well, who's going to stop me?"

"The teachers," she said.

"Nah, my teachers won't see. They're too busy counting us to make sure we're not lost."

"Then the museum guards."

"What, the old men? If they're not blind then I'm Michael Jordan," the boy said.

Annoyed, Cory turned to put a finger to the water again. The boy grabbed for her shirt sleeve, smacking his lips as his teeth cracked down on the gumball's surface.

"What school are you with?" he asked.

"Westwood View," she said.

"Well, if we break for lunch at the same time, wanna sit with me? I got fruit roll-ups I'll share."

Cory looked up at the boy, removing her hand from the water only to brush a lock of dark hair from her eyes. He was still smirking, jaw crunching, saliva working.

"No."

?

He wasn't real.

Still, Cory wanted to touch him just to make sure.

She reached a pale small hand out, expecting it to sink into the polyester of pants.

He isn't real.

A hard knock interrupted her motion, and echoed within her skull. She put the hand to her head, and felt a small knot forming, as a technicolor gumball bounced next to her on the floor. She looked up, pained. It was the little boy, standing over her, cruel grimace of glee marking his face.

