Vincent

“Today we have that part of my course that you all love. Constructive Criticism, or as it has been bastardized–‘Show and Tell’.”

Professor Peterson holds his dramatic pause just longer than is comfortable, then continues.

“An author must have the courage to read their work aloud, and to bear the weight of comments and constructive criticism.”

The gathered students say nothing. One nods. This late in the year, they understand. Show and Tell has nothing to do with support–it is all about the internecine struggle for a better place on the bell curve.

Peterson continues, his pleasure obvious.

“As I said on day one–when there were so many more of you–only half of one percent of you will ever have a book even reviewed by *The New York Times*. So, my goal in this course is to ensure the other ninety-nine point five understand that and give up, no longer waste my time.”

He shakes his head, as if he already knows exactly who makes up the ninety-nine percent.

“As in life, the mathematical tyranny of the statistical bell curve is ever-present. It is a line along which, in your future careers, you will be scattered like seeds on stony ground.”

They understand the implication for the course. Even if just three students remained at the end, each a nascent Hemingway, they would be clearly

distinguished. One would receive the spotlight, one would lie in the mediocre middle, and one would sit at the end point—a place of despair, destined forever to write advertising copy for deodorant commercials.

With a clap of his hands, he calls them to attention.

“The last assignment.”

Again he stops, as if thinking back to some blissful time.

“You will recall, it was to write a pen picture of one of your fellow students. A simple enough task, I had hoped, for writers of your supposed caliber.”

He leans back against the table, looks up at them, yet makes it seem he is looking down.

“I asked you for descriptions which saw into the depths of your subjects. I advised you to look at Van Gogh. I urged you to consider how he used his paints. In my naïve assumption that you would be capable, I told you to apply your words with the same care Van Gogh used his brushes. If a penniless non-entity using nothing but a brush and pigment can show the depths of human fragility, what more should you be able to do with a thousand years of language and a fortune spent on your education?”

In his hands, he holds the ten short essays from the class. The sheets wave slightly as he flaps them. A few of the students try to read his scribbled green ink comments. Even the hue of the ink, pale or nearly black, could be read as a cue.

“Your work didn’t disappoint, but then my expectations were so low that disappointment was hardly possible.”

He shakes his head.

“Each of you had to choose as a subject one of your colleagues. I intended—” again he stops. “I intended,” he repeats, “that we would read them blind, and you would vote. First to see if you could identify the subject, and then just how well the description fitted.” He nods, apparently to himself, then stops.

Peterson, master of the machine-gun demolition of stumbling prose, bites his lip. He gazes for a second into the distance. Standing below them on the stage of the lecture hall, he holds their benedictory attention. He nods again, apparently reluctantly reaching a decision.

“Instead, I have selected a single piece that—well.” He looks at them as a hunter might when laying a trap. “This piece—it either displays so many of the grievous faults I warned you against, that I sense the writer has devised it as a pastiche or mockery of my teaching. Or— or it is a work of genius.”

A whispered rustle of confusion flutters through the students. The weakest perhaps fear they have slipped into some nightmare world where it is they who have erred. A few of them flick through their own copies, wondering if what they wrote could have been interpreted as described. None consider their work a work of genius.

Eyes question, and shrugs respond. Members of the class glance at each other now. The passion, real or conjured, with which Peterson usually delivers his invective seems drained, as if a shadow or shell of their tutor stands before them.

Despite there being only ten students, the auditorium for their lecture is large, reflecting Peterson’s importance to the university. Usually, the students congregate in a small, shoal-like huddle in the middle of the hall. Today, as befits the nature of Show and Tell, they are slightly more separated and further back, higher up in the room.

There is a single exception—a solitary figure sitting one row back from the front. This quiet rock in a sea wave of empty chairs is staring ahead. She sits stiffly. Her oversized grey-pebble jacket looks too large. Her short dark hair, spiked upward and shot through with a red blur, challenges the room silently.

“Mouse!” shouts Peterson. A second’s silence falls, replaced within moments by a susurration of whispered questions. There is a rustle of movement as heads crane for a better view of the figure between them and Peterson.

“Mouse,” he repeats, “perhaps you would like to demonstrate your literary talents?” There is no invitation in his voice. Even as a command, it sounds like the delivery of a summary judgment.

Mouse hardly moves. Maybe there is a fractional quiver, the uncertain tremble of a rodent sensing a raptor. Yet there is something else. The lack of movement is as much a statement of defiance as fear. Perhaps she is declaring, ‘I am here’.

Mouse nods—not obeying, but agreeing. Somehow she has taken his demand and granted a favour.

She doesn’t reach for her copy of the essay, and Peterson doesn’t hand over his marked version.

She begins—staring into the darkness, a dream voice which pulls them in with its quiet insistence.

“In his dark eyes there is the hint of something unsettling. The words *malice* and *triumph* seem entwined there in a shape-shifting embrace.”

Now, her voice rises, small, yet somehow filling the auditorium. It has a subtle strength—the type found in marriage vows, or perhaps a requiem. She goes on.

“His hair is of dark curls…”

The students glance between them. Only one has thick hair, which twists in furious locks. But the students turn their memories inside out. At least two of their number have recently cut their hair short and close to their heads.

Mouse continues.

“…oil-slicked and smooth with sweat from his head, yet it feels like coarse wire beneath my fingers.”

Now there is something guttural in her voice. Her words seem to flow momentarily over rough, tumbling stones before settling again.

“His voice has the timbre of a subtle poison. His mouth is covered by a mask which filters any humanity, leaving only dry and awful commands, requiring obedience.”

There should be weakness now, but her voice is that of a distant observer.

Outside, there are running footsteps—an errant student hurrying late to a lesson. In the hall, there is the silence of uncertainty. The listeners find themselves gazing into a dreadful place in their imaginations.

“Yet, as he hovers above me, and as I turn my head to look into the shards of the shattered mirror on the floor, I learn something more of him. He is a Medusa. His stare changes me. As I lie pinned beneath him, I am no longer me. I have been turned to stone.”

The voice of Mouse remains firm. Yes, she is stone—granite.

“I feel his hot breath and taste its smoky staleness. His skin, once pale, now red with exertion, is changing. Subtle shifting patterns tattoo his cheeks and his forearms where he holds me down. These are patchy, feral patterns, calling of a hyena rather than a man.”

They are staring at her now. The small figure whose back is straight and whose voice is either steel-strong or age-dried—they cannot tell.

“At last, he rises from me, shape-shifting as he steps away. I make another discovery. In my light he shrinks, then grows again with distance.”

“I understand the awful truth that Vincent saw, know too why it drove him mad. I close the door to my room, begin to sweep up the broken glass, and cut my hand.”

“My red blood splatters into a pattern of the boy, and I wipe it away with a tissue.”

Mouse stops, rises and sweeps her gaze across Peterson and then the other students. She sees herself reflected in their eyes, understands that the reflection is a subtle thing, with confusion at its origin.

She walks from the room, leaving the subtle shadow of her memory behind.