

“Qui Restituet”

by Andrew D. Doan

There is a quiet, unyielding tyranny in emptiness. A page. A stage. A canvas. Blank space is unable to justify its own existence. It must be conquered. Creation groans to be unleashed.

Not everyone feels this weight. Many are able to ignore it altogether while others are oblivious to its existence. There are those, however, for whom a blank canvas or an empty sheet of paper will forever be an overlord. An expressionless, voiceless dictator holding them hostage. These are often the same ones who find themselves hopelessly in love with their craft. Stockholm Syndrome for creatives.

Amy Lin knew the tyranny of emptiness intimately.

On a Tuesday morning thick with clouds and care, she sat on her wooden stool and stared into the unblinking eye of her captor. It was a small canvas, but she had yet to make the first brushstroke.

She first felt the pulses of creativity as a young girl. She heard them more clearly in her teenage years even as she attempted to defy their gravity.

She failed.

It wasn't for a lack of trying. She resisted her creative impulses for 22 years—but not because of any great distaste for art on her part. On the contrary, sketching, coloring, and painting had always been rewarding distractions for her.

Her attempts to escape the pull of the blank canvas stemmed primarily from her parents. Fleeing social and economic unrest swirling around their homeland, they'd come to the United States with the intention of building a new life from the ground up.

They succeeded.

Their success hadn't come easily. It took nearly a decade of working, saving, and scrimping before they'd felt confident enough to breathe slightly easier. For as far back as Amy could remember, her parents had been setting a trajectory for her life. This course had a singular objective in sight above all other concerns—financial stability. They were determined that their daughter would enter the American

workforce with an occupation that was specialized and highly rewarded.

As a result, Amy spent most of her formative years with a textbook standing staunchly between her and the rest of the world. She excelled at every level of her education. Honor Student. Valedictorian. Summa Cum Laude. Degrees in both Biology and Computer Science. While working toward a master's degree, she'd been offered an illustrious internship in New England.

Two months before the internship began, however, she altered her path irrevocably. Looking back, it was difficult to identify which moment was the turning point. They all blended together like the colors in one of her paintings. A trip to the Rhode Island coast. A seaside gallery visit. Evening drinks and a one-night stand with the gallery's featured artist—a friend of a friend. At some point during those few days on the coast, she admitted something to herself that she'd known for years.

She didn't want to be a scientist. She didn't want a master's degree or an illustrious internship. She didn't want what her parents wanted her to want. She wanted to draw. To paint. To imagine. To create.

Armed with a freshly formed confidence in her artistic abilities, she burned her bridges one by one. The master's program. The internship. Her parents.

There was no room in their view for compromise. They saw her choices as selfish, near-sighted rebellion. The foolish meanderings of a woman much too young to appreciate the significance of what she was doing. Their insistence that she discard her intentions and get back on track only bolstered her determination not to. The lines had been drawn. The cord had been cut. Amy was on her own. She moved to the Rhode Island coast with only her pride, her imagination, and a blank canvas beckoning her to begin.

Ten years later, she sat stumped and sour.

The image of a bird's nest snuggled into the crook of a tree had been orbiting her mind for several weeks. The tips of several beaks would be visible just above the upper edge of the nest. Gaping. Straining. Waiting to be fed. Mother bird would not be seen. The

question of her condition left unanswered. Amy liked the idea. There was tension between the tenderness of new life and the austerity of an old Earth. She wanted it to feel cold. Uncertain. Austerity is winning the tug of war over tenderness. Most of her artistic ideas had this somber overtone. In those days of overwhelming tragedy, it was difficult to feel anything else.

It took seven days to create the world, ten thousand years to fill it, but only 43 months to devastate it. Several years after Amy's declaration of independence, four horsemen had ridden furiously across the land, leaving a swath of oblivion and rubble behind them.

The first was financial collapse. The technological infrastructure supporting most of the world's economy had crumbled through a series of complex and coordinated cyber-attacks. The breadth of these attacks was unlike anything that anyone had ever imagined. The wealth of individuals, companies, and sovereign nations was thrown into such a morass that commerce became nearly impossible. Responsibility for the attacks remained unclaimed while their impact continued to reverberate across the globe.

The second was an international health crisis. Within six months of the financial collapse, a series of pandemics ravaged the world's population. These waves of infectious illnesses made no distinction between the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd worlds. They spread with fury and pushed fatality rates higher than ever before. It was as if nature itself turned against its masters and pulled the human race into a slough from which many never escaped.

The third was cultural breakdown. In spite of the unimaginable specter the world was facing—or maybe because of it—many of the world's leading nations obstinately pressed forward and tried to maintain their cultural relics. For two years, movies still showed, athletes still played, musicians still performed, and national celebrations still took place. Over time, however, even the most ardent advocates of keeping calm and carrying on realized the futility of their efforts. With little money to spend and even less motivation to spend it, with debilitating infections slinking through public corridors, with happiness and frivolity beginning to feel perverse and hollow, the citizens of the world chose to discard their costumes and cancel the masquerade. In the United States, most people pointed to a single

event as the watershed moment in the nation's cultural disintegration. More precisely, it was the absence of a single event. Americans greeted the first ever cancellation of the Super Bowl with a spirit of morose capitulation.

The fourth and final was a series of natural disasters. Every flood, earthquake, mudslide, and hailstorm felt like an obnoxious sucker punch in the distended stomach of the human race.

After four years of near constant calamity, the tide of catastrophe began to ebb and the survivors began to sort through the remnants. Every man, woman, and child became the captain of their own fate. Survival was the primary goal on every mind, and the maxim "desperate times call for desperate measures" became the slogan sounding from every tongue. Most regions developed a sort of primitive tribalism in which subsistence was the predominant community value. Long distance travel was rare. The scope of daily life constricted to include only the most basic of tasks and activities—something Amy found endlessly irritating.

She used a pencil to begin hewing the faint outline of her bird's nest vision onto the surface of the canvas. She moved slowly through this part of the process—partly out of habit and partly because there was nothing else for her to do that day. Her next visit to the food depot was still six days away.

Her choice to move to the Rhode Island coast had come at a severe personal cost to her at the time. In hindsight, however, she'd come to realize that this choice had been deeply fortuitous for her when modern civilization began to collapse. She lived on a stretch of coastline that had been only marginally populous before the Fall. Her town and those nearby hadn't been hit as severely as other regions. Those who were still around the area had carved out a manageable equilibrium over time.

Within months after an epidemic blasted through most of the northeastern states, Amy's community had established a food depot several miles down the road. The rules of the co-op were simple. Everyone had to contribute an amount equal in weight to anything they consumed from the supplies. Bring a pound of tomatoes if you want to take a pound of rice. A set of scales on site overseen by a

group of vigilant volunteers ensured that this rudimentary system kept Amy and her fellow survivors from starving to death.

Amy adhered to a self-imposed standard of visiting the depot only once per week. The three-mile bike trip was so laborious and the mood among her fellow survivors there was so pessimistic that she couldn't stomach more frequent outings. She'd travelled to the depot the previous day and would force herself to wait before returning.

Internet access had been destroyed in a hurricane two years before. Phone service and electricity were intermittent. Television broadcasts—when one was able to receive them—were either horribly depressing or obnoxiously indifferent to the worldwide tragedy. Amy had nowhere to go, no way to get there, and no one to join her if she went. She greeted this day, like the hundreds that had come before it, with nothing to distract her mind or occupy her time other than her canvases—blank and belligerent.

By late afternoon, the picture was slightly more visible. She'd finished the pencil underlay and filled in an initial layer of color. Her shoulders and upper back were sore from sitting stiffly on her stool for most of the day. She stared for a minute or two at the emerging work in front of her. There had been a time in the past when she relished each stage of her paintings as she completed them, but now her pleasure in the process was waning with every canvas she filled. Stretching her arms upward with a sigh, she tossed her brush onto a nearby table and walked toward the door of the shed that served as her art studio.

She moved across the small yard that stood between her studio and her single-story home as the sun was slinking toward the westward horizon.

"Hey! Amy! Have you done your duties this week?" The tinny-toned voice leaked through the knotholes in the wooden fence separating Amy's yard from the one next to it.

"Hello, Rita. How are you this evening?"

"I'll tell you how am I. I'm wondering if you've done your duties this week!" Sarcasm and derision weighed heavily in the words.

Rita Langston had lived in the bungalow next door for nearly 30 years. She'd come to the coast long before either Amy or the apocalypse swept into town. Amy didn't know much about the old woman other than the fact that she'd been mildly unpleasant before the worldwide catastrophe and was nearly unbearable since.

"You've got to be sure you do your duty, Amy. That's the only way this whole thing works around here. Everybody has to do their part. You understand that? You understand how important you are to the rest of us?"

In addition to the food depot, Amy's coastline community had established a series of tasks to be completed each week in order to preserve the health, sanitation, and sanity of those who had chosen to shelter in place. Rita, along with a few other residents, spearheaded this effort and established the protocol.

Amy tried to deflect the force of Rita's questioning, "Yes, ma'am. I do understand how important it is. How important / am."

"Well, I'm not so sure that you do." The two women couldn't see each other. Amy was standing in her yard while Rita was squatting on the ground in her small vegetable garden on the far side of the fence. "If I remember correctly, you were supposed to be on water duty last Wednesday, but you never showed up! Isn't that right?"

Amy stepped over to the fence and peered at her neighbor through one of the knotholes, "Yes, Rita. That's correct, but it's not as bad as you're making it out to be. I didn't show up because I was ill that night. Hank from down the road said he'd fill in for me."

"Well, Hank from down the road never showed up and neither did you! Now, we're behind on our weekly quota of water at the depot!" Rita stood up and glared at Amy over the top of the fence as much as her diminutive frame would allow. "This isn't some sort of reality show. This is the real deal, sweetheart! We're on a razor's edge around here, and stupid mistakes are costly." She used her gardening trowel to gesture aggressively at Amy as she delivered her lecture.

"I understand all of that, Rita. I really do. I'm not sure why Hank never showed up, but I will talk with him about it. I promise I'll

be there next time I'm scheduled—even if I have to drag my lifeless body across the dirt to get there.”

Rita returned to her garden as she spoke, “If only your sense of civic responsibility was as sharp as your sense of sarcasm. It's obvious you don't like doing your duty, Amy. Nobody really *likes* doing these things, but we have no choice. You wanna live? Do your job! It's not like you don't have time for it. Seem to find plenty of time for drawing pictures!”

“Have a nice evening, Rita,” Amy muttered as she turned toward the house and left her sour-faced neighbor to stew in solitude.

Throughout the evening Amy tried unsuccessfully to think about anything other than Rita's spiteful comments. Her insinuations about Amy's artwork were the most bothersome. They reminded her of things her mother would say. *What good does a painting do for the world, Amy? Pretty pictures won't feed your children or keep them from getting sick. 92% of artists don't earn enough from their work to support themselves. Does that sound like the life you want?* Amy never verified the accuracy of the statistic her mother liked to throw around. If it hadn't been true before, it certainly was now. The demand for boutique artwork suffers significantly when potential buyers are facing the prospect of imminent destruction.

Rita was right about one thing. Amy didn't like doing her duty. She dreaded the days when her name was next on the roster. The unfaltering routine of the system grated on her sensibilities. In the earliest days, she'd approached her duties with vigor and optimism. She felt useful. Her little town was doing something to help restore order to a disheveled world. They were fighting back against clouds of oblivion that seemed poised to overwhelm the globe.

After some time, however, the forecast changed. The survivors no longer felt like the world was ending because they realized that it had already ended. This was their destiny—sentenced to life without parole in an endless cycle of living hand to mouth. Humanity reached a point where it felt like things couldn't get any worse, but the real disillusionment came from the sense that things couldn't get any better either. Amy's weekly regimen of “civic duties” began to feel like a fool's errand.

That night, she let her gaze roam across the shadows on the surface of her bedroom ceiling and considered the painting she had started that afternoon. The young birds were craning their beaks upward in unbridled expectation.

I hate to break it to you, birdies, but mamma ain't comin' back! You're on your own. Better get used to it!

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Midway through the next morning, Amy crossed the yard to her studio quietly and quickly so as to avoid another skirmish with Rita. The door of her shed squealed in protest as she pulled it open and stepped inside.

She stood at the doorway and stared in silent confusion.

Where is it?

Her painting was gone. The easel stood empty in the middle of the room. She looked to the wall on the far side and realized that several of her completed paintings were also missing.

She rummaged around the shed for several minutes until the absurdity stopped her cold. What was the point? She wasn't looking for a set of keys or an earring that had fallen behind a dresser. Her paintings were too conspicuous for her to have misplaced in a moment of carelessness. They weren't lost. They were gone. Stolen.

She slumped onto her stool and tried to process the situation. In her stunned state, she couldn't imagine a plausible reason *why* anyone would steal her work. Instead, she glared at the door of the studio and began trying to deduce *who* would do this to her.

Could someone from the local scavenging team have taken them? It seemed unlikely. According to town rules, occupied dwellings were marked with a melon-sized circle of blue paint on the door. Amy's house and studio were both tagged appropriately. Anyone working on scavenging duty for the town would know her place was off limits.

What about a non-sanctioned scavenger? A looter? This hadn't been a problem lately as aspiring thieves found that most everything of value had already been taken.

The screen door on the backside of her neighbor's house slammed shut with a loud smack.

Could Rita have taken them? Maybe as a way of getting her point across? Teaching Amy a real-life lesson about the best way to use her time?

These and the few other possibilities Amy conjured up were unlikely but not unthinkable. She returned to her house as confusion melted into anger.

Someone had taken her artwork. There was simply no other conclusion she could reach.

A hollow feeling of violation and loss sat on her chest. She'd never had anything of consequence stolen from her before. Even as the world around her had been tearing apart at the seams in the past months, she had been able to hold on to most of her stuff. She'd escaped the notice of the bullies and looters through it all.

Now, she stewed in the knowledge that someone had maliciously taken a sizeable chunk of what she had left. This was *her* artwork. Not just because she owned it, but because she *created* it. She was the one who conceived the ideas. She was the one who pushed herself to force them out into reality—tangible colors and shapes. Snapshots of the world as she saw it. They were *her* vision. *Her* passion. They were the few items left in her world that brought a modest amount of pleasure.

A series of doubts emerged as she sat on the edge of her bed. Pleasure? Was that really true? Did she still enjoy painting? The hours she logged in her studio in recent weeks had been more frustrating than inspiring. More clouds than thunder. More smoke than spark.

When she'd first made the decision to abandon her parents' plans for her and pursue art instead, she'd been romanced by the idea of creating something original. It was thrilling and magnetic. She'd fantasized about sending her work off into the world like a note in a bottle. Sharing it. Selling it. It wasn't about the money because she never made very much off her pieces. Instead, it was the thought of allowing someone else to look through her eyes. The idea of sharing her vision was exhilarating.

Public interest in her work had been promising in the old days. There had been talk of a possible exhibit at a local gallery—something she daydreamed about from the moment she first heard the suggestion. Everything had seemed so hopeful...

Then the bottom fell out. Tragic events followed one upon another and transformed the human race beyond recognition. Beyond recovery. Soon, it became painfully obvious that there would be no exhibit. There would be no patrons. The possibility of sharing her art with the world vanished.

As Amy rummaged through the cache of fruits and vegetables in her kitchen, she allowed herself to listen and concede to the words directed at her from an unseen source. *Your passion was gone long before your paintings were. A thief may have taken your artwork, but the world had taken your art much earlier than that. You've been faking it.*

She knew it was true. The only reason she'd produced anything at all recently was the hope that it would prove therapeutic for her. She now recognized that this had been self-delusion. Perhaps there were some artists—true artists—for whom the simple satisfaction of the creative act itself was enough. She reckoned with the realization that she was not one of those artists, and she never had been.

In this small dose of enlightenment, she found a surprising sense of comfort and liberation. The thief who infiltrated her shed the previous night had done her a tremendous favor. He'd given her the excuse she'd been looking for without even realizing she had been doing so.

Amy was no longer an artist. Maybe she had never been one in the first place. Either way, she was done pretending. Mom and Dad finally won.

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For the next month, Amy thought as little about her former life as possible. Instead, she heaved renewed energy into the task of existing. She began filling her time with a variety of chores and

occupations. She volunteered for extra hours in town—to the surprise and delight of neighbor Rita.

Amy still speculated occasionally on whether or not Rita had taken her artwork as a way of rousing her practical sensibility. She never summoned the courage to ask Rita outright, but she held on to her suspicion. Other than this periodic spell of curiosity, Amy rarely reflected or reminisced on her former attempts at artistry. There was little practical value in doing so.

It wasn't until the first time she ventured back across the yard into the shed that she considered her past self. She entered with the intent to clean out the space and transform it into something new.

Once she crossed the threshold, the rich smell of paint and canvas rushed toward her with surprising intensity. She'd been trying fervently for weeks to forget how deeply art was woven into her. Though she was hesitant to admit it in light of her newfound freedom, she missed it.

She glanced at the back wall of the shed and saw that even more of her works were gone. During his first visit, the thief left three pieces hanging on the wall. All three were now missing.

The theft didn't feel as bothersome this time. Instead, Amy felt only curiosity as she grappled once again with the question. Why would someone take her artwork?

In the former world under normal circumstances, the most obvious answer would be money. Someone was stealing her work and selling it. Flea markets. Hotels. The internet. Someone somewhere would pay something for her pieces.

But that was under the old order. It now seemed unlikely that her artwork was making its way to market. Money, though not entirely obsolete, was severely diminished in usefulness. Most folks dealt in the currency of real items—building materials, produce, dry goods, meat, and livestock. Amy couldn't envision someone trading one of her canvases for a couple of pigs or a bag of rice.

As she walked back into her house, a laughable image caught her attention. What if, instead of trading her work for other useful materials, someone was selling them as useful materials? She

imagined her paintings covering a hole in a roof somewhere or forming the side of a chicken coop. Practicality over aesthetics.

By mid afternoon, Amy convinced herself that she'd solved the puzzle. The hours she'd spent envisioning, sketching, painting, and perfecting each of her works had, in the end, amounted to mere kindling for someone's cooking stove or materials for a makeshift fence. The universe was playing a practical joke and watching Amy with a smirk. Yet more proof that her mother had been right all along.

Rather than ruminate on the frivolousness of her art career, she decided instead to tumble down the rabbit hole a little further. Like a mouse discovering a rip in a bag of potato chips, her art thief had stumbled upon a reliable cache and would likely return looking for more. Amy saw no harm in setting a trap for him when he did.

Late that night she settled in for a stakeout. She'd transferred three paintings from her house to the shed that afternoon. After dinner, she set up a surveillance post by the first-floor bedroom window consisting of a beach chair, a TV tray table, and a bag of sunflower seeds. The sky was clear and the moon was full. The conditions were ideal for her to catch a thief, though she had no idea what to do with the perp if she was successful. She settled in and waited for him to arrive...

Sunlight radiated through the window and forced Amy to open her eyes. She was still sitting in the beach chair. The nearly empty bag of sunflower seeds sat on the floor next to her chair. She couldn't remember nodding off to sleep, but she was sure the shed had remained undisturbed as long as she was awake.

She swept across the yard frustrated that she'd likely missed his arrival. Opening the door with a fervent swing, she stood in the sunlight and stared in surprise at the back wall where she'd placed the three paintings the night before.

All three of them hung undisturbed on the wall precisely the way she'd mounted them. She leaned against the doorframe and tried to push back against a surging sense of disappointment. He hadn't shown up. Why not?

Her disappointment was illogical. She should have been happy that her privacy had not been invaded again—grateful that her

artwork had not been pilfered in the darkness. The sense of sadness remained nonetheless.

The following night, she set her trap again and reported to her post. Again she fell asleep partway through the night and awoke to find the paintings rooted in their spots. This second dose of failure provoked her obsession even further. Undaunted, she waited a week before making a third attempt. She decided to use three different paintings this time around as if the quality of the bait was somehow affecting her success.

Inexplicably, the change worked. All three paintings were stolen that night, but Amy had been unable to stay awake long enough to see the crime unfold. Despite this, she was emboldened and encouraged to discover that her burglar was still at large and interested in her pieces.

She became more strategic in her approach. She still had nine original works left in the house. She waited a week before putting three more of them out in the shed. When she snuggled into her beach chair by the window that night, she brought with her a stainless steel pot from the kitchen. She'd read once about riverboat pilots who would use pots or pans to keep themselves awake as they guided their watercraft along at night. If they nodded off, the pan would fall from their sleep-loosened grip and smash to the floor with a clang.

She woke stiff and sore in her beach chair the next morning with her fingers wrapped tightly around the handle of the pot. Inside the shed, the art thief had visited once again.

Amy regrouped. One week later, she took a long nap in the afternoon and used some of her cherished coffee reserves after dinner. She settled into the beach chair once again, but forced herself to get up and walk several laps through the house every half hour. The night hours trickled by as she waited. Sipping. Walking. Standing. Watching.

Just before dawn the squeal of the shed door sounded across the lawn. She clambered back to her window and watched the door intently. Sunrise was mere moments away, but it was still difficult to see clearly in the waning darkness.

After several taut minutes of waiting, Amy gasped when a young girl, not more than 11 or 12 years old, emerged from the shed with three painted canvases strapped to her back like a school bag. The girl moved so quickly from the back yard that Amy had to run to the front window of her house to track her movements.

The girl mounted a bicycle and sped off down the gravel road that wound through Amy's mostly deserted neighborhood. Amy pulled open the door and stood on her front step for a moment's consideration. The sun had begun to creep over the horizon, and she could see the girl pedaling farther away. After another moment of hesitation, Amy hurried to the side of her house where her own bicycle was leaning.

She urged the bike down the road with as much energy as she could muster. As the sunlight continued its steady fade-in across the land, Amy maintained her pursuit. Keeping a respectable distance, she followed the girl up the town road to the state highway where they both turned their bikes eastward. In former days, this highway had been a slogging stalemate of tourist traffic nearly every weekend in the summer. Now it sat empty, neglected, and obsolete.

For nearly an hour the two riders continued down the highway. Amy figured they'd covered nearly ten miles by the time the girl turned south onto a road similar to the one that led to Amy's town. Bursting rows of corn lined the fields on either side for the first half-mile. Amy's bike urchin was steadily pedaling a few hundred yards ahead when she took a hard left turn and disappeared into the sea of green and yellow.

When Amy reached the spot a few moments later, she saw that the cornfields were hemmed in by an irrigation ditch with a small building standing in the clearing just beyond. A weathered sign to the right identified this location as the Sandpiper Elementary School. Amy spotted the girl's bike propped up in a rack in front of the building. Just beyond the rack, a pair of dust-covered glass doors formed the entrance to the school.

She propped her own bike in the rack and approached the front doors like a suspicious cat. The muscles in her neck and chin were taut as she performed a wary appraisal of the hallway just beyond the smudged glass entryway.

No lights were on. This community, like Amy's, appeared to be powerless. Had electricity been available, the fluorescent lights in the ceiling would have illuminated the bulletin boards and wall decorations lining both sides of the hallway and given it the cheerful, welcoming atmosphere it was intended to have. As it was, the bulletin boards and child-shaped silhouettes painted on the walls created a ghostly, foreboding pathway through the shadows.

Amy tried to ignore the shiver that wanted to tumble down her spine as she walked past the haunting reminders of former days. Though she didn't know where she was going, she knew she wouldn't be able to stop until she got there. The main hallway stretched out from the entrance before branching off to the right and left. Just as she was considering which direction to take, the murmur of voices floated toward her from the hallway to the right.

She moved forward with cautious fascination. All of the classrooms lining the hallway were empty and silent except for the third one on the left. The door was ajar, allowing Amy to see shadows moving about. She was still several yards away when someone emerged from the room and brushed past. Amy looked back and watched the stranger plodding down the hallway toward the school entrance. It was her art thief. She moved passed so quickly that Amy didn't have enough time to recognize her or say anything. Instead, Amy stood in the darkened hallway and watched the young girl walk away without a word. She no longer had the paintings strapped to her back.

Follow the girl or investigate the classroom? Amy deliberated quickly. Her instincts said to follow her paintings. The sound of voices continued to project through the partially open door of the classroom as she stepped forward and knocked.

A moment later an older woman in sweat pants, t-shirt, and a paint-smeared apron stepped from behind the door. She regarded Amy with a smile, though there was a look of concern underneath.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

Amy considered for the first time the absurdity of the situation. What possible explanation could she give for being in an abandoned school building uninvited? On the other hand, what possible explanation could this woman give for the same thing? Amy

thought about creating some sort of cover story—policewoman, neighborhood watch, something official sounding—but she was terrible at lying and improvising.

“Hi. I’m—my name is Amy.”

The apprehension on the woman’s face softened but did not disappear entirely. “Hello, Amy, I’m Elizabeth. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I’m—I guess—“ she stammered and struggled to find a way forward, “what exactly is going on in here?”

It sounded far more investigative than Amy intended. The woman’s look of concern resurged.

“In here?” The woman opened the door wider to reveal a dozen children working at tables, “This is—this is art class.”

The scene before Amy seemed too fanciful to be real. Like the rest of the building, there was no electricity in here. The only light in the room came from the windows and from a battery-powered lantern positioned near the center of the work area. The floors and walls of the classroom were dingy and unmaintained. Several ceiling tiles were either missing or hanging crookedly above the children. The air was stale and thick with the odor of crayons and markers. The children sat working with energetic diligence and no apparent concern about the condition of the classroom around them.

“Art class?”

“Yes. That’s right. We’ve been meeting here for the last few months,” the woman continued on quickly, “The school has been closed for two years, and I couldn’t find anyone to ask, so I just started doing it. Maybe I shouldn’t have.” Amy could tell that the woman— Elizabeth—was feeling defensive and uncomfortable by her presence.

“Started doing it?” The whole thing struck Amy so oddly that she couldn’t think of anything else to do other than throw Elizabeth’s words back at her in the form of a question.

“Yes. The art class. I know I probably shouldn’t be in the school building without official permission, but like I said—no one has been around to ask. I guess I just gave myself permission, so to speak,” she finished with a cautious smile, “Are you here to kick us out?”

“Me? No! I’m not anyone—I’m no one,” she still hadn’t found her footing in this unexpected conversation, “What I mean is. I’m no one important or official. I’m not here on an inspection or anything like that.”

Elizabeth relaxed visibly, “Oh. Well, in that case, would you like to come in and see?”

Amy stepped forward and peered through the dimness at the goings on inside. On the table before them, each of the students used pencils, crayons, or markers to draw on a large sheet of paper. They chatted happily with each other as they progressed on their own projects and occasionally inspected the work of those next to them. Not one had yet looked up long enough to notice Amy’s presence in the classroom.

Elizabeth watched Amy watching them then spoke with a sense of parental pride, “We meet twice a week in here for art class. Obviously, it’s pretty difficult to come by supplies these days. Luckily for me, I had a large supply stocked up at my house before all the problems started.”

“You were an art teacher?”

“I *am* an art teacher, yes. Have been for almost 30 years. I’ve taught here at Sandpiper for the last 10 years. Actually, longer than that if you add in the time since all the trouble began and the school closed.”

Amy marveled at the way the woman spoke. Her tone was easy and gentle. It betrayed no hints of the pain and grief she, like the rest of the world, had endured over the last four years.

“But, how did you get something like this started?”

“This?” Elizabeth swept her hand in front of her in a wide gesture, “This just...happened a few months back. My neighborhood is mostly empty, but there are still a few families hanging on. Several of them have kids. Most people around there knew me as the art teacher before everything happened, and someone mentioned that it might be nice for the kids to have something constructive to do once in a while. Once I heard that, the idea just clicked. Each week I have about 20 students who come from around the area.”

“How do you get them here?”

“They walk or ride their bikes.”

A young girl at the table nearest Amy looked up just then and smiled at Elizabeth. Elizabeth leaned forward and inspected the girl’s paper, “Excellent work, Tammy. Keep going on that flowerpot. You’ve almost got it finished!”

Amy tilted her head enough to be able to see the girl’s work. A strange feeling of familiarity rushed over her. She glanced around the room at the project papers of the other students and the feeling grew even stronger.

“Are they—are they copying paintings? You know, like actual works of art—from other people?”

The defensiveness rose up in Elizabeth’s eyes once again. The pride she’d been beaming moments earlier dissipated, and the veteran teacher looked down toward the ground as she answered, “Um...yes. They are.” Elizabeth pointed to Amy’s right.

Just around a shallow corner from the doorway stood five easels each holding a painting. All of them were Amy Lin originals. Only a month earlier, they had been hanging in her studio or her house. Now they were being displayed as templates for elementary students to copy.

Amy felt a drop in her gut, but tried to mask it as she spoke, “Where did you get all these?”

Elizabeth’s cheeks began to redden. “Well, that’s the part of this whole thing that’s the hardest to tell you about. The truth is that I didn’t get these paintings legally—at least not by the traditional sense of the word legal. There’s a young girl I know who doesn’t come to class herself but is willing to sell the paintings to me.”

Amy continued to mask the expressions that wanted to surge to her face. “Wait. You’re saying that you pay this girl to bring you these paintings?”

“Yes. It’s shameful, I know, but...that’s the truth.”

“Where does the girl get them?”

Her cheeks reddened even more. “I’m ashamed to say I don’t know and I’ve never asked.”

Amy covered her mouth as casually as she could in order to stifle the oncoming twinge of laughter. She had solved the mystery that had baffled her for the last month, and the answer was stranger than she'd ever imagined. She pressed for more information, "How much do you pay her?"

"We don't really have a set price. I usually give her some meat or seeds or something of value. She's not very picky—or friendly for that matter." Elizabeth didn't seem to notice Amy's awkward smile. Instead, she looked lovingly at her students and their works in progress. "I know it's not a good example, but I don't think most of them know or care where the paintings come from. They just enjoy coming here a couple times a week and leaving all of the destruction and despair behind. That's why I started doing this. It's really the only thing I know how to do well, and I just couldn't stay at home anymore tending my garden and sitting on my hands all day. I was going crazy!"

"Yeah, I know what you mean. They really enjoy it, don't they?"

"They really do. I know it seems a little bit silly in light of everything else going on in the world right now, but this class is helping these kids. They've told me so—nearly every day when they leave to go back home. This is one of the only things they've got left in their lives that brings them joy...hope."

Amy's impulse to laugh was gone now replaced instead by a tender tugging inside her chest. She gulped down the emotion of the moment and looked back at the kids.

"That's pretty amazing."

"Yes, I think so. I'm very thankful I found an unlocked door here at the school a few months back. I'm thankful I had all those art supplies stored up at my house. None of this would be possible without those two things. Who knows? Maybe the little bit of basic instruction I give these kids will turn out to be something much greater one day!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, things won't always be like this. Life won't always be this bad, right?"

Amy only shrugged.

“It has to be true,” Elizabeth spoke with a confidence that Amy couldn’t muster, “One day, things will start to get better. We will rebuild. Life will go back to...something more than this. It just has to. When it does, we’ll need someone to finish the paintings and write the poems. We’ll need artists. We always have. Maybe this class will be the starting point for someone who’ll be there when the restoration begins.”

Amy looked at the shimmer of hope in the old woman’s eyes and craved to have a taste of it for herself.

“You really believe that?”

Elizabeth chuckled, “Yes. I know it’s sentimental and silly, but I believe it. Most days I do.”

Amy turned toward the hallway. “I guess I better get going. Thanks for letting me pop in. You’re doing a good thing here.”

Elizabeth rested her hand lightly on Amy’s shoulder. “You’re most welcome. Please come back anytime you want to.”

“I might do that. Thanks!” Amy took another step away from the class then turned back and looked at the art teacher, “I have one more question for you.”

“What’s that?”

“What do you think of the paintings? The ones you buy from the girl, I mean. Are they...any good?”

Elizabeth tilted her head toward the row of Amy’s paintings standing at the front of the room for all the students to see and mimic. “Well, I’m no expert, of course, but I think they’re all right. Nothing spectacular, but they have a simple quality to them that I like. I think it makes them perfect to use as examples for beginners.”

Amy didn’t even try to contain the laugh this time. She bid the art teacher goodbye with a smile before walking out and returning home on her bike.

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Several days later Amy returned to her studio, pulled out one of her remaining blank canvases, and began sketching an idea for a

new painting. She worked on it several hours a day for the next two weeks. When it was finished, she took a few days' reprieve before starting on another one and another one after that. She continued this way until she had no more canvases. She put all the effort she could muster into making each one simple and straightforward. She dutifully hung each of the finished paintings in her shed and walked across her yard each morning to see if they were missing from the night before. About once or twice a month, she pulled the squealing door open and found that her work had been taken.

Elizabeth the art teacher was right in her prediction. Over the course of the next several years, a time of repair and restoration began to take shape across the lands. The resurgence was slow and unsteady, but the glacial force was undeniable. Gradually, nations began to rise and renew. The scars of the global catastrophe were ineradicable to some extent, but the human race refused to remain in the slough indefinitely. Little by little, hope took hold.

For Amy, this meant an eventual move from the coastland to a small apartment near Boston where she had access to valuable resources. She began working at a local health clinic several days a week and painting on the other days. She lived this way for another 45 years. Working and creating. Helping and painting.

Most of her work sat harmlessly in a closet during those years. She sold some of it as public demand for artwork gradually returned. No one considered her pieces to be particularly valuable or excellent. To critical eyes, she was never more than just a mediocre artist at best.

One painting hung prominently on the wall of her small living room. It was a large canvas bearing the image of a dimly lit classroom with a handful of children sitting at tables hunched over crudely drawn works of art. She'd used a dark palette for all of it except a small lantern in the middle of the scene piercing through the deep browns and blues with brilliant yellow and white.

From the moment she finished it she considered it her masterpiece.