

The After-School Heist Program

I suppose the first time we ever felt that bottomless, insatiable hunger was when Max got hit by a car. The three of us wandered aimlessly through the dilapidated streets downtown as usual; Leo led the pack with a cocky, toothy grin as I trailed behind him - desperately trying to absorb any of his charms by just standing close - while Max brought up the rear, warding any illicit passersby off with his protective big brother aura. A shiny, cardinal red bike leaned against a weary lamppost and stopped us all in our tracks, the gleaming metal harshly contrasting with the decrepit surroundings like a precious jewel buried in the sand. A bike was a luxury we only saw around the corner of our dad's frame as he tugged us away from their aisle in hardware stores. It was no surprise to see Max clamber on with his usual solemn eyes suddenly sparkling with possibilities. He flew down the street as Leo and I raced beside him, all relishing in the unfamiliar feeling of having *things*. For once in our lives, we were just like every other kid – free of the shameful stigma of debt, soaring through the air as all the pressures weighing us down were dashed away.

But we all failed to question *why* a perfect bike was abandoned, and the straightforward answer was: it didn't have brakes. The car that barreled towards Max didn't seem to have any either, as both vehicles made no attempt to stop, despite the frantic pumping of handlebars and blaring horn honks. One had swerved left, the other veered right, and the air was filled with a loud snap, shrill shrieks, and – if one paid close enough attention – the starving bodies of three small children, craving once again that fleeting feeling of acceptance through possessions.

Two months later, Max itches his cast absent-mindedly as we trudge along the damp sidewalks, scuffed shoes sloshing through rainwater and bits of loose gravel pooling in the cavities of the concrete. Derelict houses with boarded windows and storefronts with smashed glass dot the grey skyline, lining our path deeper into the city. It is a dreary, early April afternoon, and the monotony of life is starting to take its toll. The season had long overstayed its welcome, leaving the city in limbo between a snow-studded winter wonderland and the promise of sunny warm nights. It makes even our fourth-grade schools days drag on into numbing mush as we all wait for the transition from one period to the next.

The only thing keeping us going is the longing, the *need*, that licks at our gut like a flame for the feeling of material goods, bought just for the sake of buying, not out of necessity. So, we continue searching for satisfaction, never drifting from our ambition, refusing to return to the days of aimless wandering.

A young woman with flowy tawny hair meets our gaze from down the street, the scent of privilege wafting off her. She notices our matted hair, faded graphic tees, bruised legs, and clutches her purse, quickly marching across the street with short, curt steps, averting her eyes. Leo scoffs at her, but like the good little soldiers we are, the three of us never stray from marching to our goal. We put up with the looks, the whispers, the sudden 'closed' signs appearing in doorways because we know one day - *one day* - we will finally find the item that will bring us to their level, and they will never turn their gaze away again.

Suddenly, a jewelry store emerges behind a rusted pickup truck. Unlike most businesses' chipped paint, the store's sleek and inky black exterior stands tall against

the dusty sky, challenging it with an air of pretentiousness. A delicate glass figurine sits past the crystal-clear windows, laying on a velvet cushion. It seems to sparkle, even though no sun can break through the thick clouds and beckons us closer. The boy made of mirrors is mid-stride, reaching up to the imaginary sky filled with a flock of porcelain birds behind it, which float in the sterile air, suspended by clear rods of crystal. It refracts and glows, the glass-blown body a symbol of all that we want – all that we need. Leo presses his face against the window, daring to meet the shining boy's jewelled eyes while I grip his shoulder, peeking out from behind his frame with the fear one exhibits when faced with their God. We stare in reverence for what seems like an eternity, frozen in time by the statue and its shimmer, before a gruff voice breaks the trance, reminding us of our place in the socio-economic hierarchy.

"What are you dirty kids doing, fogging up my glass? Get out of here before you ruin the whole place with your grime!" The store clerk barks, herding us off with a frantic wave of his hands.

Perched on the very edge of the sidewalk, we continue to stare, wide-eyed at the figure. The hunger claws at our insides, shredding the tissue and demands to be fed.

"I bet no one would treat us like that if we had that little glass boy." I whisper, the words fluttering out of my mouth before my judgement can stop them. We all knew where wishing got us – nowhere.

"Who says we can't have it?" Leo shoots back, plastering a smug smile across his sticky face, the smile Max and I know always means trouble.

Days seem to slip by as we glare at the store, our eyes never leaving the figure but our minds racing with the grand plan Leo had announced. Leo's knees bounce to

the pace of our racing heartbeats, thoughts swirling with the hope of a new beginning, the pride of thinking of an idea, and the fear that came with following through. Max glances down at us with his usual solemn, world-weary eyes. I know he didn't trust the plan. But I also see the hunger is ripping his insides to threads, just like mine.

"We're gonna get in huge trouble." He says through clenched teeth, yet his gaze never falters from the window.

"The plan'll work perfectly." Leo snaps back.

"Will not."

"Will too."

"Will not!"

"Will TOO!"

"Shut up!" I hiss, pointing a stubby finger at the ajar door, "he left for a smoke!"

We move like a machine; the dancing fire of anxiety in our minds and creature clawing at our guts leaves no room for even the thought of mistake. The shimmering statue urges us forward, pulling us towards it like we are attached by a fishing line, caught in its hook of promise and hope. Leo catches the door at the last moment before it slams shut, and the three of us move through the gap like liquid, all while the store clerk's back is turned.

Max and I carefully step towards the display case, our sunbaked sneakers softly crossing the plush crimson carpet, careful to not leave any stains of our poverty behind. I lift a shaking hand towards the statue and can already feel the smooth crystals on my skin, the weight in my palm. My new life flashes before my eyes as I motion to embrace its frame. They would never make fun of me again, I wouldn't hear the laughing behind

my back, I wouldn't see the lights flickering or the empty fridge, I'd be happy, I'd be whole – before my dreamy fog evaporates, sliced through by a booming howl approaching from outside. One more head whips around to the voice than expected – Leo – his own aching desire led him away from his post by the front door, and now the store clerk was racing towards us, eyes blazing with fury.

Heavy breaths and the musky scent of sweat fill the air as a tangle of gangly limbs and worried minds struggle to tear themselves apart. I race towards the end of the store as hurried footsteps follow in pursuit, sliding across the polished wood desk and out the back exit, sprinting until my legs burn, my eyes water, and the blazing store clerk has given up the chase.

Max and I flop down onto the damp gravel, letting the rocks dig into our skin as the pain grounds us to the dreary world we almost escaped from. We watch 'Plan B' begin over the heaving of our chests, eyes following a plump silhouette reach and grab for the short, scrawny figure that dodges and ducks from his meaty grip. I suppose Leo was smart enough to always think of a way to work around his own stupidity.

Max and I listen to the sound of our raspy breathing turning rhythmic and slow as we both soothe ourselves with the same thought, replaying it over and over in our minds.

"How do ya' think this is gonna change everything?" I ask, breaking the tension that formed around us, finally saying what we both were mulling over.

"I bet ladies won't walk away all scared and stuff when we start hauling that around." Max leans forward on his good arm, letting a spark once again to enter his dull eyes, just like on the bike months ago.

“And all those mean girls won’t laugh behind my back!” I pipe up, inching closer to Max, allowing myself to wish again for a better future.

“Dad can pay all those bills on our kitchen table...”

“...and we’ll never have kraft singles for dinner again!”

“We’ll make lots more friends.”

“And buy new clothes!” I giggle, kicking my legs up to the bleak sky in a fit of joy.

We indulge deep in our fantasies, causing the hunger to grow and morph, clawing up our throat, threatening to burst out into the open air. But we refuse to quell it because we know Leo will come racing out the back any second, finally putting to rest all our troubles, hunger pains, and the old ways we used to live.

Right on cue, Leo rips the suffocating seal of the glossy, velvet-lined store and explodes out the backdoor. His scrawny silhouette evolves into a complete person as he emerges from behind the frosted windows, cradling in both hands the culmination of our wishes, hopes, and dreams – the shimmering statue. It glows in his delicate clutch, illuminating his face and casting shadows along his cheeks.

We pounce on our newest possession like a pack of hyenas ripping apart the flesh of a fresh kill, desperately trying to fill our hollow souls with material goods and satisfy the crippling hunger. Leo's hands grip the statue's base, holding the glass boy up to the sky just as a priest offers his chalice up the heavens. Max and I softly place our fingers on the crisp surface of the figure and they glide across its glass body like liquid. Waves of emotion turn and swell deep inside my body as I close my eyes and finally allow myself to dream, dream of a better future, a better life, a better world. Finally, we

are just like everyone else. Finally, we have quieted the screaming monster living inside us. Finally, I am truly happy.

But the stabbing feeling in my chest says otherwise. Doubt breaks like glass inside my throat and buries the shards deep in my lungs.

Now what? How are all three of us supposed to share this thing and keep the bullies away?

My throat tightens, and a low wail squeezes out.

How is Dad supposed to pay the electricity bill with a stupid statue?

My chest heaves, scrambling to suck in air, but I don't feel anything.

Do you think people are really gonna stop judging you? Stop hurting you? Just because of one useless item?

Black spots fill my vision. I can't breathe. I can't feel. All I can do is berate myself.

Why aren't I happy? Why aren't I happy? Why. Am. I. Not. Happy.

The question plays on loop in my mind, droning on and on, searing itself into my brain. I'm not happy. But why? The others know the answer already, too; I can tell on their face. Max's warmth drains from his eyes for the last time, falling into a perpetual grey, dull fog. Leo lets out a shriek of frustration, burying his head into his arms, nails stabbing at his scalp. But I refuse to accept the truth. I grip the statue, turning it under and over, hoping – praying that I find something to stop the burning tears from trailing down my face, anything to stop the crushing weight of reality from trampling me to a pulp. I race my hands down the crystal, hoping a saving grace lays under its sleek, sparkling skin.

Only it really isn't shimmering. In fact, the statue feels coarse under my hands, and a sharp, unpolished edge catches flesh. A droplet of blood trickles down the dull glass, barely comparing to the glowing miracle I witnessed minutes before – in fact, it hardly even refracts light at all, choosing instead to trap the rays in its cloudy body. A sharp crack runs straight down the middle of its right eye, branching off and spreading across the whole statue like a vine. This isn't a beacon of hope. It isn't a crystallized manifestation of purity, coming to absorb all the hate and filth from our lives. It's a piece of cheap plastic, and it can't do anything to save us.

I walk to the edge of the road with dragging feet, placing the far too heavy statue in the middle of the street. The bubbling feeling of joy is nowhere to be seen because that dream of acceptance was dead on arrival; I wished on a corpse of lies and fantasies. I notice the hunger is gone from my body, not from being satisfied, but from finally acknowledging it will never even be fed. The beast that clawed and shrieked finally retreats into the deepest crevices of mind, somewhere I can't even reach.

The three of us silence the wails and cries, turning away and diving deeper into the city, letting our bodies wander and our minds go blank. In a few hours, we will return home – back to the decaying house with the flickering lights, the barren fridge, the mouldy baseboards, and the overwhelming feeling of emptiness. We will lie down on the floor and feel the frigid ground fuse with our skin, becoming one with poverty. We will close our eyes and finally lose the battle against our existence, letting the disillusionment of our life swallow us whole.

Behind us, a car tears down the road and crushes the statue into a million broken shards. The glass spreads across the street, glowing one last time in the dingy sky before it grows dark.