Part of the Exhibit

I live in a museum. That may sound ridiculous to you—or perhaps impractical. But with no bills to speak of, the best view in the city of uptown and the pier, priceless artifacts, 150 staff, and all the company I could ever want, you'd be wrong.

You see, all those adults with the giant, pillared houses sip their champagne and brag about sculptures they don't even know the origin of. Or the cultural relevance. Or the artist's middle name. But I do. I know it all.

Boring, some people call it. Ha. Well, their lives aren't half as interesting as the 'Wipe your shoes' sign at the entrance.

My days are filled with adventure.

I wake up in a different exhibit every morning; although I do prefer the Pterodactyl's nest in the lobby. That's simply 'cause it's made out of Styrofoam. It's like having one of those memory foam beds and a hammock combined! Also, the security cameras aren't trained on the nest often. The fact it hangs 30 feet in the air might have something to do with it. I just jump off the third floor balcony.

One time I had to sleep in the bathroom—the *women's* bathroom. Ew. Girls have cooties. Let me tell you, the wheel chair stall is not as spacious as you may think . . . I

kept waking up to the gurgling and groaning of the old pipes (they're older than some of the exhibits).

Anyway, I wake up about four. That is, if I feel like roaming. Cause then I have to hide in the caveman exhibit so the cleaning ladies don't catch me. Some days, I just stay in the nest, lie among those plastic dinosaur eggs, and watch the people enjoy my museum.

Yes. *Mine.*

See, my great-great grandfather funded the building of this joint, which is why I'm living in it. I got rights, you know. Besides, being a homeless orphan doesn't pay all too well. Here people drop quarters like they're dead skin cells (the anatomy exhibit will tell you that you lose 1 million a day). Unfortunately, that previous sentence was a bit of an exaggeration.

People look so tiny from up there. Some skip, plenty trip, and a few stare up at the ceiling with their mouths hanging open like fish. One time I tried to land m&m's in . . . but one guy started choking cause he swallowed it.

Right. So if it's an adventure day, I have to get out of my nest without being seen. Which is tricky on the first time when you haven't taught yourself not to scream . . . Fortunately, the cleaning ladies enjoy rap music at four in the morning. The nest balances on the top branch of this synthetic tree. Using the branches and straw making up the outside of the nest as a ladder, I inch over the nest's lip and down its side. There's a moment when your heels are hanging over open space. The tiles on the lobby floor blur together because you're so high. In that moment, you have to let your feet land and feel

for the tree. Then you wrap your ankles around it and release your hands from the nest (hence screaming). From there, it's all in the shimmy.

At that point, my espionage skills kick in. I dart through the shadows so the security man can't see me, up the stairs, and into the dioramas of evolution. Personally, I find the ape/human ridiculous. I mean, who could take that face seriously? Imagine the president with leathery skin, puckered lips, and dragging knuckles. That's what I thought: scary.

So I hide behind the hairy wax butts of the caveman, in their papier-mâché cave, and wait. It gets boring, waiting for three hours for the museum to open. I keep myself busy by reviewing random facts I've learned from the exhibits and books here.

The museum was built in 1867 (It's been renovated a lot).

12 newborns will be given to the wrong parents daily.

Mosquitoes have teeth.

Ancient Egyptians made pillows out of stone.

Giraffes have no vocal chords.

I haven't left this museum in three years.

1,095 days I've been here. Why should I leave? I can transcend time periods, traverse countries, and meet more people than most other ten-year-olds. Everyone comes to the museum eventually; whether for the history, the innovation, the truth . . . I'm not sure.

One thing is for sure: I've never been caught. Not once. This one time I got close. A busty old ticket lady cornered me, squinting at me through her bifocals. "You seem

familiar. Did you come here with your family? I never seen you walk through them doors, yet you're always here!"

I swallowed my heart back down into my chest. "I'm . . . uh . . . vertically challenged."

Her jaw fell open so I cold see the giant wad of orange gum stuck on her tooth. At that point, my shock was not acted. But I added a cry for "Mom" while I ran.

Oh yeah—caveman butts. Once people start meandering in, I slip out from my hiding spot. I can hear them downstairs, their masses quantified by the amplitude of chatter echoing off the marble staircases and brass fittings.

Step number one is breakfast. In order to provide for the laziness of the population, our museum has mini food courts on every floor. On the main floor is the coffee shop for the raccoon-eyed mothers carting around the sugar-high circus. They bake scones early in the morning. The oven happens to be right by the service hallway door. I slip through the rotating shutters and snatch a steaming pastry off the rack. The food here is overpriced; they'll never miss it.

I'm short enough (about 4'2") that no one notices me slip through the wide "employees only" door back into the mainstream of chattering tourists. Watching them admire everything for the first time is the best feeling in the world. Every day I inspect and adjust an exhibit. I've tweaked, studied, and thought about them all. I watch toddlers to grannies in walkers squawk with delight at the T-Rex in the atrium. It's contagious. Never get tired of it. Not ever. It's like Christmas morning every day.

Well, from there I find a change of clothes. I do this about once a week when they're replenishing their stock and have too many t-shirts to keep track of. Today's in

purple with a Raptor on it. The shading is so realistic on his yellow-green body that his snarling face seems to be growing out of my chest. Super cool.

I stroll out of the gift shop and see a lady in the navy pencil skirt and blazer of the museum. She's pointing at the bathrooms on both sides of the museum like a flight attendant. I fall in step with her tour, just to see what she'll say about my museum. Sometimes, tour guides get a little lazy and get their facts wrong. They get tired of telling the same story ten times a day. How can you get sick of your job when you get to tell stories all day of the greatest events in history?

The guide covers a yawn with her hand and sighs. Her name is Sharon. I know because I've taken many of her tours over the years. She doesn't know my name though.

Sharon makes us traipse through the Deep Dark Depths exhibit where an old lady screams at the life-size model of the squid lit up by black light. His mechanical yellow eye is nearly as big as I am and his animatronic tentacles move on their own. I slip my hand into the lady's cool, raisin-like one.

"Don't worry, ma'am. Ol' squidy is on a strict diet of electricity and oil. He'd spit you out like Jonah and the whale." I grin up at her as she chuckles nervously and gives my hand a squeeze.

We pass the caveman exhibit, the Revolutionary War diorama, and the hall of precious stones. That last one took us double the time it normally does on the tour because all the old ladies were pointing out jewels to their husbands.

"What do you need that for?" an old grump asked, crossing his arms over his potbelly. "You'll be dead before you can wear it" He got a slap for that one.

We got to the dinosaur exhibit, which is one of my favorites (ten year old boy, what can I say). Sharon halted at the entrance and started her spiel about watching your step, etc. The room is designed to look like earth during the times of the dinosaurs. The path looks like a trail packed down from hooves. It weaves past the trees where a Pterodactyl tends its eggs, through the rocky lairs of the Raptors, and between the feet of a T-Rex. It even has a lake with marine reptiles like Ichthyosaurs that will poke up every once in a while. Someone shrieks every time. All the dinosaurs are animatronics, their scales move over their metal joints like the real things. But they're not. People jump back, pressing a hand to their heart, because they're fooled so well. Sometimes I wish my museum could be a time machine so people could experience the real thing.

"All the creatures you see in this room are dinosaurs. Some . . ."

"Excuse me!" I thrust my hand in the air, waving it madly.

Sharon's eyes search the crowd. Finally her gaze drops and she discovers me. "Yes, young man, what is it?" She braces her hands on her knees so she can be at my level.

"Actually, the Ichthyosaurs are not dinosaurs but are marine reptiles that were the beginnings of dolphins. Don't feel too bad. It's a common misconception. Some people think all dinosaurs are cold-blooded. Which I think is a much worse assumption."

"What a fine, smart young man!" the old lady holding my hand tells her friend.

I beam.

"Huh . . . haven't I seen you before?" Sharon asks, squinting at me.

I feel my smile fade. “Nope!” I scamper off to hide behind the Stegosaurs’ round belly. I need to be more careful. Sometimes the excitement makes me forget I’m not wanted here. At least, not as a full-time resident. The application demands you be at least a thousand years old.

I decide to hunt for coins. Maybe I’ll have enough with those I stuffed in the pot of the fake plant by the bench outside the pirate exhibit. It seemed like an appropriate place to hide spoils. I hunch over, bend my knees, and squint at the glossy stone floor. I find a quarter in a corner. Judging by the wad of gum cemented to it, I’d missed it for a few days.

The museum quiets as all the little home-schoolers rush to the picnic area to gnaw some pb&j. I trot down to the main floor to clean out the waterfall by the aquarium room. People think they can throw money at everything; they don’t realize they’ll clog the water pump. Which is like a billion dollars to repair. Okay, maybe not a billion. But a lot. More than I’ve ever found in coins. Definitely not worth it. All for wishes. If I were making a wish, I think I’d invest more than one cent in it.

I kick off my holed shoes and socks, roll up my cargo pants and wade into the pounding waterfall. It roars at me, pounding its fists into the pool at its feet. I roll my eyes at it. The water is only two and a half feet deep. You’d think it was twenty by all the racket and foaming.

“Hush you,” I tell it and stoop to scoop up the precious little coins. They gleam in the pure water, smiling at me. The waterfall’s mist licks my new shirt until the cotton clings to my body like a soggy second skin. But I don’t mind. It’s my shower for the day. I stuff the change in my loose pockets and clamor back over the wall in the hall. Water

follows me like a shadow and drools on the floor. Oops. It should dry before anyone comes up there. Just to be sure, I pull an old key ring out of my pocket and unlock a supply closet door, grab a mop, and wipe up my mess.

Shoes and socks in hand, I wander into the aquarium. Sea snakes sliver past me like silver ribbons. A manatee floats buoyantly like a capsized uncle after Thanksgiving dinner. His flipper circles in the water, waving at me sleepily. I crane my neck back to look at him and wave, my hand flailing sloppily side to side.

I decide to leave Mr. Manatee to his digestion and wander further in. There my favorite creature circles in his blue realm. A pearly horn juts out of his forehead like a crown as he twists his body in beautiful patterns. He is a Narwhale.

I press my nose against the glass. It is cool like a wall made out of water dividing him and me. My eyes drift down through his rocky habitat to the floor. Scattered along the drain are coppery disks I know to be change. A fist forms in my chest around my heart and anger stabs my eyes until they bleed tears. How could they throw metal at such a beautiful creature for their own selfish amusement and wishes? What if he mistook them for food and they made him sick?

I have to get them out.

I sprint for the side door. I fumble with the key ring. I know them all. But my fingers won't work. Finally I find the one I'm looking for and fling the door open. It's a little closet with a damp ladder leading upwards. Without closing the door, I climb. My bare feet slip on the slick bars and I grunt, pulling myself upwards. The thick scent of water life makes my stomach roll.

The top of the ladder goes up a little past a wooden deck. I step off the side of it. The room is a tiny, dim dome. In the middle of two half circle, fenced off pools, are tables and storage bins full of equipment to care for the sea creatures. Only half of the pools are accessible from this side, the other half are the auditorium for their shows. The coins must have rolled in from the big pool. I brace against the hip-high wall of the first pool and see the mashed potato outline of the manatee.

I scurry over to the other tank and glimpse the jagged outline of the Narwhale's horn. I yank off my shirt, getting stuck in its sticky folds. I throw it to the ground and empty my pockets onto it, all the change, the keys, and a bouncy ball.

I step onto the wall to survey the twinkling blue water below me and the shadow of the Narwhale sweeping back and forth. I suck in a giant breath, plug my nose, and jump.

The crash is muted as the cold water slaps me. Bubbles tickle my toes from the impact. I surface for a moment to grab another breath and dive, swimming like a frog for the bottom. The strange water burns my eyes but I keep them open. I have to stay out of the Narwhale's way.

He eyes me and disappears into a cave. My fingertips scrape against the rough bottom and glide over the coins. I pinch one with my index finger and thumb and shove it in my cargo pocket so it won't float out again. I hurry and use both hands. I manage to get about half before my lungs insist I surface. I feel heavy with the coins and decide to empty my pockets before diving again. I fight the urge to smile and my deflated chest swells with pride as I salute the Narwhale poking his head out curiously and kick up.

I pull myself onto a little rock lip on the side of the wall and start to hoist myself over when hands grab my arms and snatch me off the wall.

My feet flail and search for solid ground. Heart racing, I try to flip my hair out of my face. I must've sprayed someone judging by the cry of disgust.

Finally I am put down but my wrist is still locked in a vice-like grip. I use my free hand to rake my hair out of my face. Chest heaving, I glance up at a livid woman. Her brown hair is braided back and she has a hand on her hip. I study her wet suit. She must be Lola, the marine trainer.

"Who are you," she snarls.

I gulp and steal a glance at my purple shirt. She follows my gaze, drags me to it, and wads it up so it holds my worldly possessions. Then, seizing my hand, she leads me towards the pool's auditorium down a secret walkway just for trainers to a door under the stands. I jingle and drip with every step, trotting to keep up with her stride lengthened by fury.

What if they find out? They'll send me to an orphanage! I start to shake, evaporation and terror taking hold. Into the crowded hall, down the stairs, to the lobby we go. My bare feet patter behind hers. How strange we must look. Stares and whispers follow the wetsuit-clad woman and the shirtless, dripping boy. I feel shame burn circles in my cheeks.

I know where she is taking me. Mr. Peabody, the curator and overseer of the museum.

She shoots words at me over her shoulder as she weaves through the museum. "Where are your parents? You could have drowned! Or hurt our Norwhale. He cost

$70,000, you know. He is the main attraction of my show. Don't you have any respect for what isn't yours?" She swore. "Kids these days."

We step through the wooden door into a floral rugged room with elevator music and an old lady with hair like a flavorless snow cone. "Oh, Lola, how can I help you dear?" she asks in a feathery voice.

Lola grips the desk with her soft, pruney hand. It reminds me of the Manatee's flipper as he waved at me. I wonder if she spends enough time in the water if she'd end up looking like mashed potatoes too.

"I need to see Mr. Peabody."

"He's on his lunch break, I'm afraid." The lady frowns, peering through her bifocals at me. I stand quietly but Lola yanks my hand like I am fighting her. I stumble and careen into her. She shoves me back. "Stop it! Listen, Daphne, it's important. I just found him swimming in the Narwhale's tank."

Daphne drops her glasses and grabs for the phone like it's a bar of soap, her eyes growing wider every second. "Mr. Peabody, yes—don't talk with your mouth full! I have Lola here. It's an emergency! No, you can't have your chips first!" She glances up at Lola and motions them towards the wooden door to the right.

Lola marches through, me in tow. The office is full of enormous wood bookshelves. They have everything: encyclopedias, blueprints of the museum being built, model trains, biographies, pinned butterflies, etc. Behind a matching desk sits a round bald man with bushy eyebrows and a plaid tie. He blinks up at us, a giant sandwich sticking out of his mouth. Retracting his bite, he rests the sandwich on its wrapper,

brushes the crumbs from his shirt, and clears his throat. “So, what is all the fuss about, hmm?”

Lola steers me in front of him, drops the soaked shirt onto the table, and tosses her braid over one shoulder. “Sir, I found this kid in my tank with my Narwhale.”

Mr. Peabody raised a spiny eyebrow and learned back, perusing me. I felt my heart drop into my stomach. I could feel the museum slipping out of my hands with every passing second. No more Pterodactyl nest. No more caveman butts. No more morning scones. No more fascinating people. No more adventures . . . “Hmm,” Mr. Peabody said, scratching his hairless head. “What was he doing?”

“He was . . .” Lola stopped. She spun me around and shoved her face close to mine. “What were you doing?”

I offer a faint smile. “I saw some coins in his tank. I didn’t want him to eat them by accident and get sick. He likes shiny things, you know.”

Lola’s eyes widen. She does know. The Manatee loves inflatable pool balls. The Narwhale adores the sparkly hoops he gets to jump through. He tries to eat them on a regular basis. “How did you know that?”

I fall silent, gaze dropping to the floor.

She gestures at me to Mr. Peabody. “Do something!” she cries.

“Sit down, young man.”

I shuffle over to the leather chair and sit. I hear the squish of my clothes against the chair and wince.

“What’s your name, son?”

I keep my eyes on the dizzying calico carpet. The yellow flowers on a brown background was a poor decision no matter what era you consider. “Eli, sir.”

“Eli,” he murmured leaning forward so his tweed suit coat bunched around his elbows. “How many times have you been to my museum?”

I swallowed and pushed my shoulders back. “Begging your pardon, but it’s not your museum.” I risk a glance up at him.

“Oh?” he says with a chuckle. “Whose is it, then?”

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand. “My great-great grandfather’s, sir.”

He frowned now. “Where are you parents?”

I glare at the floor, kicking my feet against the chair legs. “Dead. Three years ago. Newspapers said something about a car crash.”

“Don’t you know?” Lola interjected.

I shook my head. “Dunno. Came here right away after school. I didn’t know where else to go.”

“And you’ve been here ever since.” I jerk my chin up. He has my shirt untied and is examining the keys and the change. “So you’re the one who has been shoving coins under my door.”

I shrug, blinking at him. “I didn’t want to be a burden. I just had no where else to go.”

All of a sudden the door slams open and people stream in. Sharon the tour guide, Bob the maintenance man, and Josephina the cleaning lady. They’re all chattering over each other too loudly to be intelligible. The poor old secretary has her hands cupped over he mouth as she yells, “I’m sorry, sir, they were so insistent!”

I fold my knees into my chest as Mr. Peabody stands up and fans them with his arms, trying to get quiet. “What is the meaning of this?” he demands.

“Don’ send ‘im away, sir! He’s been keeping that there waterfall from clogging fer three years!” Bob said, pulling off his worn hat and wiping his hands on his blue work suit.

“Señor, he checks every exhibit every day. I see him.”

“Really now?” Mr. Peabody asked, rubbing his chin.

Josephina nodded, her gold earrings jingling. “Si, he is the one that marks on the lists when something is dirty or broken.”

“Oh please!” Lola sputtered. “He can’t stay! He’s a little boy! He needs a family, an education . . .”

Sharon raised her hand, stepping forward. “He’s smarter than most adults. He’s been slipping in my tours. Sometimes I see him go off and just study an exhibit. Or in the bookshop reading about anything he can. That child is a genius.”

Lola shook her head. “Doesn’t he have any relatives?”

Mr. Peabody smiled at me sadly and shook his head.

I don’t know how he knew. Maybe he’d known about me all along.

“Then put him up for adoption!” Lola pointed out the window as if the orphanage was right there and moving away as we spoke.

“No!” Josephina said in her thick accent.

Bob laid a heavy, hairy hand on my shoulder. “We’re his family.”

A spark of warmth burst in my chest like a firecracker as I craned my head back to look at the collage of a family. We were like the museum, a collage of stories, shapes,

and sizes. I couldn't help but grinning at them. I had followed them for three years; I knew them but they didn't know me. Until now.

Mr. Peabody rubbed his face with his hands. "I agree whole-heartedly, but the nature of your suggestion is illegal."

Our smiles shattered.

Mr. Peabody sighed, circled around his desk, and knelt in front of me. He rested a meaty hand on my knee and squinted up at me through his round spectacles. "There is one thing we could do . . ."

We all jerked our chins up at the same time.

"I could adopt you, Eli." Mr. Peabody said softly. "And then you could live in the curator's quarters with me. You'd have to go to school during the day but you can help me design the new exhibits. You won't have to hide anymore."

A smile grew on my face.

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My name is Eli Peabody, I am ten years old, and I live in a museum, the absolute best place to live ever. I get to give tours, design exhibits, and swim with a Narwhale. My family consists of 150 people plus everyone who sets foot on that marble lobby floor. And everyday is an adventure.