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The Counter

a short story by COLIN CHISHOLM

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It's not as easy as it looks, standing all day in the murky light of the museum. My feet ache and swell with blood, my back hunches in protest. People shuffle by, but they don't see us. That's why the museum hires immigrants: we are invisible.

It's a pointless job, really. How many art museums have you heard about being robbed in the light of day? I've worked here for seven years, and the worst crime I've witnessed was a teenage lesbian pressing her ruby lips to the thigh of a marble Rodin. You can be sure we converged on her like a SWAT team. Anything to break the boredom.

We all have our techniques. Jordan, my friend from Cameroon, wears no underwear and touches himself all day. He's

most content in the Southeast Asian exhibition, where if you know where to look you'll find erotic art. Fatih from Pakistan carries one of those hand exercisers with the plastic handles and the big coiled spring. His forearms are the size of large eggplants. Tarane is from Turkey. She used to be a pharmacist. Her eyes are as small and black as raisins, and she swears she can sleep standing up. She's one of a lucky few.

I stay awake by counting. For example, yesterday I counted the number of people wearing Nike sneakers: 2,864. That's a lot considering we get only eight thousand visitors on your average Thursday. Sometimes I'll count bald men, or married women, or cold sores. It's incredible how many people walk

Photo: Virginia Sorrells

with some kind of a limp, but you'd never know it unless you stood in a museum eight hours a day, five days a week, for as long as I have.

I know some unusual facts about the exhibits that your average curator does not. For example: the Samoan display has exactly 343 artifacts; the West African totems feature 19 semi-erect penises, excluding the one that was broken during a French assault on the Ivory Coast; and the museum contains exactly 811 bared female breasts, 720 with nipples intact.

I had other plans for my life, as most of us do. The fact that I count body parts is not something I tell my children. I have three of them: Vanja, Marko, and Elinkja, my little black flower. My wife, Mirjana, is gone. She had always wanted to come to New York; her favorite film was *West Side Story*. As smart as Mirjana was, she believed too much in America. It's a fairy tale if you're rich, but not so easy if you can't afford the rent. This city has an insatiable appetite for people like us; there are more sheets to be changed and toilets to be cleaned here than anywhere else in the world.

I'm not complaining. I have a green card, a job, schools for my children, an apartment in Brooklyn. Soon we'll be citizens. I wouldn't return to Yugoslavia if you threatened me with death. In New York I don't tell anyone that I'm Serbian, lest they take me for a war criminal. Since the war, we are all rapists and murderers, cousins to Milosevic. When strangers ask where I'm from, I shrug my shoulders and pretend that I don't speak English.

At eleven, Vanja is a mirror image of his mother: sandy hair and sad gray eyes, a softness in his voice. The hardest thing I do every day is look him in the eyes to let him know I love him. He's too young to take care of Marko and Elinkja, but he does anyway, because sometimes I work at night and we can't afford a sitter. Marko and Elinkja are twins, going on eight, just babies when Mirjana died. Marko is quiet, like Vanja, but Elinkja is burning inside. When I drop her at school in the morning, she grabs my leg and bites at my hands when I try to pry her off. She's been sent home three times for fighting, which threatens my job because I have to fetch her. When I tell her this, she stares at me with boiling eyes. She sneers at my accent and asks why I can't speak proper English. It's one thing to hear this from some jerk on the subway, but quite another when it's your daughter, whose eyes are so soft and brown it breaks your heart.

The museum rotates us to a new station every two hours to keep us on our toes. Today I've been in China and Egypt, and presently I'm in the Arms and Armor exhibition. Just in case you want to know, there are 630 weapons here: swords and knives, guns and guillotines. Don't ask me how a guillotine qualifies as art. I've also been counting people with missing fingers but have seen only four. One day I counted more than thirty, but that was on account of a bus load of farmers and their wives from Iowa.

In Vukovar, Croatia, where we lived before the war, there was a Serb commander known as Arkan, who gained a repu-

tation for cutting off his prisoners' fingers, one at a time, for no particular reason. The prisoners didn't have any useful information; they weren't even soldiers. One of my Muslim friends, Emir, a surgeon, had three fingers lopped off, but that was nothing compared to what they did to him later.

One of the newer museum guards is a Bosnian named Josaf. I didn't tell him that I'm Serbian, but he knows, just as I know that he's a Muslim without anyone telling me. It's strange how that works, but true. I knew he was Muslim even before I knew his name.

Not that I care. I mean, I don't hate Muslims. Mirjana was half Muslim, which means my children are one-quarter Muslim. Before the war it didn't seem to matter, at least not in our circle of friends. Milosevic changed all that. You could smell fear in the air, and hatred, which is the same. The war turned neighbors into starving dogs, fighting for some scraps.

Josaf and I avoid each other, not because we know each other's pasts, but because we don't want to know. When we pass each other in the museum hallways, we avert our eyes. He smells like cigarettes and coffee.

I have no training in fine art. Before I started working here, I didn't know the difference between a Picasso and a Rembrandt. The museum doesn't care; if we were experts, they'd have to pay us more. In Yugoslavia I was a doctor, but I try to forget that now. To remember too much is to mourn, which will not feed my children.

Perhaps that is why I am drawn to the museum's atrium, where Tiffany's stained-glass mosaics cast the light of dreams. There is nothing in the world quite like leaving the dim, musty halls of the Middle Ages for the openness of the atrium, where the light flows into me like the air I breathe. Japanese maples flourish among the statues, a fountain gurgles, and against one wall Tiffany's mountains glow blue beneath his autumn trees. In the atrium I do not count things; here, Elinkja calms in the light.

It's a benefit of my job, free admission for my children. Some weekends I bring them here, though the museum is the last place I want to spend my free time. First we walk through Central Park, Elinkja and Marko pestering each other, Vanja two steps behind with the seriousness of a nanny. I wonder how people see us. We are clean and handsome enough, but our clothes are faded and worn, passed down or purchased at thrift stores. After all these years, we still look like immigrants, and I've given up trying not to. A few people stare, but the beauty of Manhattan is that nobody stands out. We are four of millions.

We eat hot dogs or ice cream and watch people roller-skate or run or bike in endless circles around the park. We feed the ducks, pet the dogs — all the things everybody does in Central Park. Marko likes to hold my hand, but Elinkja rarely does. She trots along a meter away, pretending to be by herself.

We don't usually stay long in the museum, because the children get tired and so do I. We always end up in the atrium, where Elinkja stares wistfully at Tiffany's mountains and riv-

ers, as if looking at a place she has known before and loved. Her little fists uncurl. She sighs. Sometimes she leans against me, and I hold her as her mother used to.

On Wednesday the museum is slow, although “slow” is still five thousand visitors. I begin the day in a new exhibit of modern art, which has thirty-one paintings resembling exactly nothing. Rather than using a brush, the artist spread paint onto the canvas using various birth-control devices and tampons, which to me would be something like performing surgery with a chisel.

Mirjana was a nurse. We met in the hospital when I was a medical student in Belgrade. Nobody would admit it, but many of our patients were malnourished, and some were even starving. These were the years soon after Tito died, when we all pretended that his plan would still succeed. Meanwhile, children came in with broken bones that wouldn't heal, and there were two-hour queues for bread.

“This wouldn't happen in America,” Mirjana said.

And she was right. After counting them for seven years, I can say with some degree of certainty that Americans are fat. I've counted fat people, skinny people, black people, yellow people. Despite the museum's boasts of multiculturalism, most of its patrons are white. Many are fat. And they come to see art made by dead white men, many of whom were also fat. The African exhibit is deserted, despite the penises.

On Thursday I begin by counting bone buttons from Scandinavia. Here's the thing: how many bone buttons do people need to see before they get the gist? In half an hour I count 270 buttons, and I'm not even halfway through the collection. By the time I rotate to Twentieth Century Art I'm no closer to understanding buttons.

While standing by Pablo Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*, I count four Germans and one blind man being led around by a German shepherd, which growls at me. Some days this job gets to me, and this is one of those days. By lunchtime my head is throbbing and my lower back aches. I sit in the cafeteria eating my half-price French onion soup, gazing around at the masses (113 people) stuffing their jiggly necks beneath the postmodern, plastic chandeliers (24). Mozart's sonatas drift across the void, and I wonder how I have come to such a place. I leave my body and rise into the sky. I see myself slumped over a glass table, a slice of wet bread sagging in my hand. I don't look good. I float higher, rising out of the cafeteria and out into the sky. I see my children in school, Elinkja alone at her desk, her eyes too empty even for sadness. Soon I can see the whole of North America and Europe, and Croatia sloping smoothly into the Adriatic Sea.

We can go back, I think, knowing it isn't true. As I drop toward Vukovar, the taste of diesel heavy on my tongue, I see black smoke rising from the shattered red roofs of the old town, bricks strewn like broken bones. As I look closer I see the hospital, the place where the shell went in, and firemen running toward the fire. I hear a cello and the voices of children singing. Too quickly I fall back into myself. My soup is

cold, the cheese congealed.

After work I see Josaf on the subway. My heart races, and I wonder why he's going to Brooklyn. He is muttering to himself, but I can't hear what he's saying. Mirjana slips into my head, the clean white line of her nursing cap, one leg tucked beneath her as she sits by a wounded child's side. The subway's brakes are the whistling of mortar shells. I count feet with painted toenails (12) to drive it all from my head, then slip from the subway when it lurches to a stop.

One Sunday when I take the children to the museum, Josaf is on duty in the atrium. It is strange how much we look alike, with our crooked noses, blue eyes, and coarse black hair — except he is heavy and I am skinnier than I should be. When I see him, I want to leave, but I know Elinkja will be upset if we don't stay awhile. Josaf and I have never spoken, but there is a strange familiarity between us that transcends the glances we have exchanged at work. Perhaps it is the dark shame of our mother country, or the guilt of having left it. I don't know Josaf's story, but his presence is a reminder of what I have lost.

Josaf catches me staring at him, and I look away. I sit nervously on a bench in front of Tiffany's *Autumn Landscape* while Vanja and Marko play hide-and-seek among the statues. Elinkja sits next to me and stares ahead into the glass forest glittering in the late-afternoon light. The river seems to flow beneath the burning trees. Bruised clouds linger in the sky. A storm is gathering, or lifting, I can't tell which. Elinkja leans into me, asleep. I hold her in my arms, feeling the hotness of her brow and the twitching of her limbs. It is only in sleep that she yields to my embrace.

After a few minutes I notice Josaf strolling closer. He doesn't look quite right. His blue uniform is stained and wrinkled, which is against the rules, and his hair is matted on one side. Pinprick pupils float untethered in his pale blue eyes, so unfocused that for a moment I imagine he is blind. He stops an arm's length away, his shoulders hunched and his hands wringing. I can smell him, and it is not good.

(end of excerpt)