

A Portrait of the Artist

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Charles Midwinter teaches high school science and lives with his wife and two children in Minneapolis. When he isn't teaching, he enjoys racing around the lakes on his bike, reading and writing fiction, or playing Go, the ancient Chinese game of strategy. Strategy and a possible interest in screwball comedy seem to be in evidence in "A Portrait of the Artist"—the author's first professional publication.

Chris is sitting in his chair, looking at the canvas propped up in the center of his apartment. He spent the whole day stretching canvas, but he has no idea what he wants to paint. His arms are crossed against his chest. His face is slack, tired, uninterested, but he makes himself stare.

On the walls hang the many pieces from his pixelism period. Imagine pointillism, but on an absurd scale, and that's pixelism. In pointillism, it's okay to vary the spacing of your dots, and various effects are achieved by doing so. In pixelism, this is strictly prohibited. The dots have to be in a near perfect matrix, mimicking historical computer monitors. Eight hundred by six hundred is most common, although a few mavericks have undertaken higher resolutions with success.

On the wall is a pixelism self-portrait. Chris painted it two years ago, and it has already begun to look like someone else. The lines in his face are deeper than they were then, and he has lost weight. In the portrait he has good color. There is fullness in his cheeks and lips. Now his cheekbones nearly jut out, and he's becoming pale. His blond ponytail has begun to thin.

He stops staring at the canvas and rubs his eyes with his palms to scour the pain from them. He stretches, arching his back and tilting the chair onto two legs. He can see the rafters exposed in the ceiling. There are things living there. He knows every nest and web. There's the brown recluse he's too afraid to touch. There's the spot where the mice come in, bolt across like circus performers, and disappear back into the wall.

Sometimes, there are bigger things up there, too. There's a corner where something strange will scurry around once in a while. It's a little like a squirrel, only smarter. He's heard stories about these strange new animals before, but a week ago he saw one, and has been eagerly awaiting its return ever since.

His doorbell rings. It's the kind that was invented a hundred years ago, an actual ringer in an actual bell. Every time it rings it is testament to a long line of shitty landlords. He tries to ignore it sometimes, is trying now, but that first design was a good one. It's loud and grating, hard to tune out. So he rocks the chair forward onto all four legs, and goes to answer the door. He leaves the apartment, and walks down a

yellowish hallway. The last apartment on the left smells like pot. At the end of the hall is a stairwell of concrete that also smells like pot. He trots down the steps with echoing clack sounds.

He walks down a final sick-green hallway and he can see someone through the glass front doors. On the front step is a girl in black. Flashes of light wink in and out of existence on her pale skin as she turns, her many piercings catching the light. She has tattoos all over. Some of them are interesting up close, but from a distance they make her look dirty. Not that she isn't dirty. Chris sometimes wonders if she ever washes her black hair. The matted dreads always look the same, down to the rusty clips that hold them in place.

He walks through the first door to the mailbox area, and lets her in.

"Hey, Chris," she says.

"Hey," he says.

She walks past him, down the hallway and into the stairwell. He starts after her, but by the time he reaches the stairwell, the door has already closed. So he opens it again, and when he gets into the stairwell, he can hear the door to the other hallway swing shut. He shakes his head. Not for the first time, he wonders how she can be so damn quick without hurrying.

By the time he gets to his apartment, she's sitting in front of the door. He walks up to open it, but she doesn't get out of the way. He waits for a moment, but she just sits there.

"Wanna go inside?" he asks.

She's spaced out, thinking about something.

"Lanna, let me open the door."

She sits there, stone-still, staring right through his legs. He nudges her shoulder with his knee, and she finally scoots out of the way. Apparently she wants to finish her thought, though, because she doesn't follow as he enters.

His feet hit the hardwood floor, and it lets out a creak. Chris hears something rustling in the corner. It looks like a squirrel, only larger, and it is scaling his brick wall. It isn't climbing the wall like a normal squirrel. It is too cautious about picking its footholds. Not that this compromises its speed. It has nearly reached the ceiling.

Chris looks at it carefully, trying to commit as many details as possible to memory. The last time he saw it, or one that looked a lot like it, it had unscrewed the lid from his peanut butter.

As the creature reaches the top of the wall, it leaps onto a rafter and perches there for a moment. For the first time, Chris is able to get a look at its hands. They look like squirrel paws. Their tops are furry. Their palms look tough—good for tree-grabbing. The digits end in pointy claws. But there is one strange thing about them. From the inner side of each paw, a curved, white claw protrudes, exactly where thumbs would go...if squirrels had thumbs. Chris has already stopped thinking of the creature as a squirrel.

The creature flexes its paws, its bony thumb-claws clacking against its finger-claws. It runs across the rafter and into a hole in the ceiling, leaving a wisp of the brown recluse's web fluttering in its wake.

Lanna walks in.

"You missed it again," says Chris.

"What?" she asks.

"That thing. It was here again."

"What are you talking about?"

"That big squirrel thing. It ran up the wall, and I think it has thumbs."

"Oh, the peanut butter thief."

"Yeah, it has thumbs. Very strange, I think. Well, maybe not thumbs, exactly, but bony things that it can use like thumbs."

"I don't know why I keep missing it," she said, shaking her head. "You should get a picture." Chris gets the idea that she doesn't believe him.

"Yeah, I should," he says, and takes a seat in his chair. Lanna goes and sits down on his mattress in the corner. Her black leather bag is studded with pointy metal. Out of it, she pulls her computer and all the strange peripherals she connects it to. There are the goggles and the gloves. The olfactory tube and the earbuds. Strangest of all, though, is the chest strip. She sticks it to her cleavage. When there's some particularly important information coming in, it will tickle or burn her, depending on priority.

"I can't wait for the day when they can give me all my intel directly through my skull," she says. "I'm getting tired of lugging all this shit around."

Chris stares at his canvas while she gets her gear on.

"They almost followed me here," she said.

"Who?"

"The spooks," she says.

"Oh. They still after you?"

She can tell he doesn't believe her. "Yes," she says. "They are."

"Well," he says. "You're safe here."

"That's sweet, Chris," she says. When she smiles, the metal pieces in her cheeks all point outward, like the spikes on a blowfish.

There is silence as she gets the rest of her gear on. When she is finished suiting up, she begins waving her hands around in the air. No doubt she is as attuned to her other world as she is deaf and mute to this one.

Chris rises from his chair and goes to get his paints. In a few minutes, he is in a smock. Soon colors are moving across the stretched white.

In a few hours, Lanna comes to. She's finally starting to feel tired. When she peels her gear off, she is numb in a few places. She'd rub them, but she'd probably scrape her hands on all the metal.

Chris is sitting in his chair again, looking at the canvas, and Lanna feels a bit sorry for him. It looks like he hasn't moved since she put herself under three hours ago. She goes over to talk to him, but, as she gets

closer, she notices that there's color on the canvas. He has actually painted something.

"Chris!" She skips around to the front of the picture, and lets out a gasp. "It's hideous! What the hell is it?"

"It's that thing I told you about," he says. "See the thumbs?"

"Those don't look like thumbs. They look like bones or something."

"Yeah, they must not be very developed yet. But I guess they're good enough to open a jar of peanut butter."

Lanna looks at the face of the creature that Chris has painted. "It really does look smart," she says. "It looks like it's thinking." After another moment, she says, "I don't trust it."

"I dunno," says Chris. "I kind of like the idea that there's other intelligent life out there."

"Out there, as in outer space; that idea I like. Out there, as in just outside your apartment, that creeps me out."

"I don't mind sharing my peanut butter," says Chris.

Lanna inspects the painting again. "It looks real. Is it more pixelism?"

"How do you know it looks real? You've never seen it."

"Believable I mean. It looks believable."

"Yeah, its pixelism. The last one, I think."

"I always liked that style," says Lanna.

"I know," says Chris, and he smiles at her. He always thought that she had good taste in art, even if it didn't transfer over to the world of fashion. She blushes a little when she notices his smile.

"I have to go in a few minutes," she says. "I've got a couple of errands to run. But I was wondering if you'd do me a favor first."

"What?" he asked.

"I want you to check around outside, just around the outside of the building before I go."

He thinks about being a kid, and having his dad check for monsters under his bed, in his closet, etc., before bed, and he worries a little about Lanna. Maybe she's been taking too many stimulants. "Yeah, I'll check," he says. He gets up and walks out the door.

It is still smoky in the halls, but he takes his time walking anyway. It feels good to have finally painted something again, and he savors the feeling. He thinks that he'll just walk around the building a couple of times, come back, and let her know that everything is safe, but as soon as he steps out the front door, he runs into a suit. The guy is white, bald, and has some kind of weird earbud. It could be a hearing aid, but probably isn't.

"Hey," says Chris as he steps onto the concrete. "Are you the new tenant?" he asks, knowing that he is most definitely not.

"No," says the bald guy in a suit. "I'm just waiting for a friend."

"Who?" asks Chris.

"No one you know," says the bald guy.

"I know everyone here," says Chris. "I'm the building supervisor."

So far the bald guy hasn't really been looking at Chris, but suddenly he is. The difference is palpable. "You're not leaving me much room to be vague," says the bald guy. Obviously, the bald guy does not want him to get into specifics, and, suddenly, Chris is not sure that he wants the bald guy to get into specifics either.

"Jesus," says Chris. "I'm just trying to be friendly."

"I'm not here to be friendly," says the bald guy. His eyes get a far-off look all of a sudden, and Chris thinks he might be listening to something through his earbud. Then they lose their far off look just as suddenly and focus on Chris. "Nice meeting you," says the bald guy. He walks away from the step and stands at the curb. A black van comes to a silent stop in front of him. Its sliding door opens, momentarily revealing a small room full of electronics that Lanna would drool over. The bald guy gets in the van with a practiced step, and the door slides noiselessly shut behind him.

Chris stands and watches the van drive off. Although he's trying to make out the plate, the characters seem blurred, as if he's looking at them through a layer of hot air. When the van has driven out of sight, he walks back inside to his apartment. Lanna is eating a peanut butter sandwich.

"Spooks, you said?"

"Yeah, did you see any?"

"Yeah," Chris says. "I did."

"Christ. How long do you think it will be until he's gone?"

"He's gone," says Chris. "But I don't know for how long. What the fuck did you do, anyway? Who are these guys?"

"I told you," says Lanna. "Spooks. You know...CIA."

"Oh," he says.

"I don't know why they're after me," she says. "Maybe that genetic screening database I hacked."

"Yeah, that could be," he says. "They probably wouldn't be too happy about that one."

"Or it could have been that malware I released last year."

"Yeah," he says. "Coulda been that too, I guess."

"I guess I'd better get going," Lanna says. "See you tomorrow?" For a moment she was a metal blowfish again. How could Chris not smile at that?

The next day, Chris is sitting across from Rico. They're on the patio of a trendy restaurant. Chris is having

a burger with some strange shit on it. They put flimsy, sweet onions on, and some strange cheese. It smells hor-rible but tastes okay.

Rico is having a liquid lunch. Chris grimaces every time Rico takes a drink. Two is way too early for nearly undiluted gin.

Rico's clothes look worn in the right places, like the knees and elbows. He's wearing sunglasses, too, even though it's cloudy.

"So what is it again?" asks Rico.

"I dunno what it is," says Chris. "But it looks a little like a squirrel."

"I see. I have to say, I don't find it very compelling."

Chris looks a little bit offended. "Couldn't you see the intelligence in its eyes? What isn't compelling about that?"

"It just looks like a very strange squirrel, Chris. You got my hopes up over the phone, but that's really all it is." Rico leans over to take a sip of his martini, and his waxy brown bangs nearly dip into it.

"It's the next step in squirrels, the next model. It has thumbs, for Christ's sake."

"My point is it won't sell." The martini is bottoms up now.

"You won't even put it in the show?"

"I can't spare the wall space, man." A green olive disappears into Rico's thin lipped mouth. His cheeks barely ripple, he chews so delicately.

Chris shakes his head and takes the last few bites of his burger. He's starting to think maybe the cheese isn't so good after all.

"Have you got anything a little more abstract?" asks Rico. "I'd love to put something up for you, but pixelism is just very out right now."

"Nah," says Chris. "It's the first thing I've done in a while."

"How have you been making a living?"

"Temp work mostly." Chris' face goes dark.

"I hope things turn around for you. I wish I could offer you a space at the gallery, but—"

"You are going to offer me the space," says Chris with certainty.

"I told you I can—"

"I'm calling in that favor," says Chris.

Rico just nods. "Do you have some time right now to see the gallery with me and figure out where you want to hang it?"

"Yeah."

"All right."

Neither is talking. Eventually, the waitress comes. Rico pays the check.

They get to the gallery. It used to be the warehouse of a big cereal manufacturer. There are still two statues of cartoony breakfast mascots standing guard by the doorway. Chris thinks that one's name is Smack and the other is Tyrone the Tiger, but it has been a long time since he watched Saturday morning cartoons. The lock is old, so Rico has to fumble with it a little to get it open. There's an art to it. He almost has to feel out the pins, has to almost pick it with his key before it will unlock. Finally there's a click. "I think you'll like this collection," Rico says. "There's a lot of innovation here." He opens the door.

The inside of the gallery offers a jarring counterpoint to the cereal factory exterior. The walls are all white, and lit by well-placed incandescence. As far as technology has come in two hundred years, there is still no substitute for the soft lighting of a hot tungsten filament.

Chris gets a look at what's on display, and realizes once more that he and Rico have very different opinions about art. "So, by innovation," says Chris, "what you really meant was condiments..."

There are paintings in mustard, paintings in ketchup, paintings in rel-ish. There are sculptures made out of butter surrounded by complex cryogenics. There is a mayonnaise collage. One interesting piece was made by angrily hurling a bowl of lobster bisque at the canvas. Chris stalks among them, through the rows of rooms with white walls, wondering, not for the first time, how these things manage to catch on. He can understand a single maverick taking some condiments to the canvas, or even two giving it a try, but three, or four, or ten, or thirty? How does it happen? Chris thought that maybe it was further proof of the one hundredth monkey effect.

"What do you think?" asks Rico. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"No," says Chris honestly. He looks at the price tags. "Does this shit actually sell?"

Rico looks a little offended. "Of course it does. Do you think I'd hang them in here if they didn't?"

Chris knows he wouldn't. "So where do I get to hang mine?"

"That's up to you, old buddy," says Rico.

Chris doesn't hesitate. "Move the bisque, and put me there," he says.

"Done," says Rico. "How soon can you have it here?"

"I'll try to get it here tomorrow. It'll be dry by then."

"Fair enough," says Rico. "I'll be here."

The two shake hands. Chris turns his back on the condiments and goes home. Rico stands there for a time, looking at the bisque, disappointed, because even if moving it will satisfy Chris, it won't satisfy karma.

The next morning, Chris wakes up to a strange noise. It's a weird pop-ping sound coming from outside his window. He rolls off his mattress and puts on his pants, calculating silently that they'll be good for another two days before he has to wash them. Then he goes to his window and sticks his head out. On the building's brittle yellow lawn, two kids—maybe twelve or thirteen—are firing an air rifle. They're

black. One has tight braids, and the other's hair is cut short. They have to pull up their over-sized pants every so often, and their huge sleeves make their forearms look deathcamp-thin.

Curious, Chris heads outside. As he walks down the hallway, his body cuts a swath through thick tobacco smoke. Once he gets outside, he can see that the kids are aiming at the roof. The yellowish brown grass crunches under his bare feet.

"What are you shooting at?" he asks them.

"Squirrels," says the short haired one.

Chris shifts his gaze to the roof and sees them. One of them is crouched low, over the body of another. Its paws and bony thumbs are grasping at the body, trying to pull it farther onto the roof and out of the air rifle's line of sight. It chitters loudly. The sound reminds Chris of crying. It strains itself to drag its friend to safety.

"Stop it," says Chris.

"This is his fucking rifle," says the one with short hair.

"If you don't listen, it's gonna be my rifle in a second."

"You take my rifle, and my dad will come after you," says the kid with the braids.

Chris grabs the rifle out of the kid's hands. The other one grabs for it, and Chris backhands him across the face. The smack is audible.

The kid screams. He's not crying, but there are angry tears in his eyes. The other boy is keeping his distance, looking ready. Chris pegs him for the smart one.

"Don't fuck with those squirrels anymore," says Chris. He turns to go back inside, and sees Lanna on the front step. She looks concerned. Chris glances at the roof again. Nothing is there. The squirrel-things must have gotten away safely.

He walks over to the door, opens it, and heads inside. She follows down the smoky hallways.

"They were shooting at those squirrels," Chris says.

"You didn't have to hit him," says Lanna.

"He should have listened," says Chris. "I just asked him to stop shooting at those squirrels."

"Chris, they're just squirrels," says Lanna.

"They have thumbs. I think one of them was crying."

"I didn't see anything up there," says Lanna. "I'm starting to worry about you, you know." Chris shakes his head. They're at his apartment. "Do you want some coffee?" he asks.

"Sure," she says, and they go inside.

Chris makes coffee in his kitchen corner, and Lanna talks about being stalked by spooks. "They're getting more and more daring," she says. "They don't even care if I see them following me."

"I still don't know why spooks would be following you," he said, pouring two cups of black. "Wouldn't

they be feds or something?"

"I'll take cream," Lanna says, "and sugar."

"I don't have either."

"All right," she takes the cup of black coffee he holds out to her. "And no, they wouldn't be feds, because I'm an international criminal." She sounds proud of it.

"Oh," says Chris. "I see."

Some of the metal in her face fogs up a bit when she drinks coffee, mostly the spikes. The studs closest to her face are too warm for the steam to condense. She's wearing black mascara and eyeliner.

"I'm getting scared," she admits. "Can I hang around with you today?"

"Sure," says Chris. "If you don't mind running an errand with me."

"What errand?" she asks.

They're waiting at the bus stop. Chris has his canvas rolled up in a cardboard tube under his arm. Rico's gallery is two transfers away, but it's going to be a nice ride. Lanna and Chris are enjoying the day. It smells like fall, crisp and fresh.

Lanna and Chris breathe in the fall air at the bus stop, and, in their re-laxation, they don't notice the two boys rapidly approaching on noiseless electric bikes. Before Chris can react, they whiz by, and grab the card-board tube. They yell something as they bike away. It sounds triumphant, profane, but beyond that Chris can't really understand what they're say-ing.

"What did they say?" he asks.

"I dunno," she says. "But they sounded pretty excited."

Chris sits down on the curb and picks up a brittle red leaf. "Shit," he says.

"Yeah," says Lanna. "That's pretty raw."

Chris crushes the leaf in the palm of his hand. "Well," he says. "At least I know where they live."

"Yeah, they'll probably give it back to you if you return their air rifle."

Chris crunches another handful of leaves and sprinkles their frag-ments onto the concrete. "Shit," he says again.

"You hungry?" Lanna asks.

"Yeah," he says.

"Let me take you out for lunch," she says.

"Okay," he says. "I'd appreciate that."

A few minutes later, the bus rolls up to the curb, and they get on.

It's the same restaurant he went to with Rico the day before. He de-cides not to get the burger this time. "What's good?" he asks the waitress.

"The seared tuna is great," she says. "We also have a nice bison filet." She's thin and pretty. He wishes he were wearing clean clothes.

"I'll take the tuna," he says. "And a double Jameson."

"How would you like that?"

"Neat," he says. "I'd like a coffee, too."

"And for you?" she asks Lanna.

"I'll take the bison fillet and the tuna," she says. Lanna always eats a lot. All the stims make her metabolism abnormally high. "And give me a bowl of the ostrich soup, too."

The waitress raises her eyebrow, and looks like she's about to say something.

"I'm hungry," says Lanna.

The waitress tilts her head slightly, as if to say okay, and goes to put in their order.

"Can I taste some of that soup?" asks Chris.

"Of course," says Lanna, doing her best impression of a blowfish. Chris smiles.

"So, I'm kind of fucked," says Chris. "I need money...bad. I'm gonna have to wash dishes pretty soon if I don't get that painting back."

They mull it over for a minute. "I've got plenty of money. If you let me move in again—"

"No, we tried that already."

Her eyes glisten for a second, looking wet. "Yeah," she says. "I guess so."

He reaches across the table and rests his hand on hers. It is warm, but there are little cold spots where the flesh is lanced by metal. "I can't take your money," he says. "It doesn't feel right."

"Why not?" she asks. "I'm happy to give it to you. It isn't like I know what to do with it anyway."

"But maybe someday you will," he says.

"Godamnit," she says. "I should just buy you a house and be done with it."

Chris is surprised. "You have that much put away?" he asks.

She grins. "Would you like to find out?"

"Christ, you're terrible," he says. Somehow, his Jameson arrived with-out his noticing. Good service, he thinks, and takes a sip.

"I know you feel weird about taking my money, but if it's ever a real problem, you need to stow your pride and ask me for help."

"Thanks," he says. "But it's never going to come to that."

The waitress delivers Lanna's soup. She offers Chris the first spoonful. It's thick and creamy. The bits of ground meat throughout must be os-trich. Chris nods in approval, and Lanna takes back her spoon, digging in with enthusiasm.

Then Chris notices something unsettling. Sitting in a window booth is a bald man in a suit. He's making an unconvincing show of reading the paper. His eyes dart constantly around the room. They lock with Chris's for a moment.

Chris decides that there is no way the guy could be a spook—he's just too inept.

"Lanna," says Chris.

"Mmm?" she asks with a mouth full of soup.

"Your friend is here. The bald one in the suit."

She swallows. "No shit?"

"He's over there by the window."

"You think I should look?"

"I wouldn't," says Chris.

"What should we do?" she asks.

"Eat," says Chris. "There's nothing he can do to us in a crowded place."

Right on cue, the tuna and bison arrive. Lanna seems worried, but there isn't much that can affect her appetite. Chris digs in, too. The waitress was right. The tuna is very good. It's raw in the middle, and lightly flavored with wasabi. It tastes light and clean in a way that only raw sushi-grade fish can.

They eat in silence for just a minute or two, until Lanna asks, "What should we do now?"

Chris looks up from his meal. There are two plates in front of Lanna, and they both look like they just came out of an industrial dishwasher. "Jesus," he says. "You're done already?"

"I was hungry," she sounds almost apologetic.

"Wait for me to finish," he says. "Then we'll figure it out."

He takes his time, because it isn't everyday he has a big filet of sushi-grade tuna for lunch. When he's done, he wipes his mouth, and downs the last of his Jameson. He stands up from the table. "Come on," he says.

"What? Where are we going?" asks Lanna, concerned.

"We're going to go ask this asshole what he wants," says Chris. "Why sneak around? He can't do anything to us here. It's the perfect time to confront him."

"No! This is stupid. If they find out that I know, they'll just pull this guy, and send out someone else. It's better to be followed by someone I can recognize than by someone I can't."

She has a point there, thinks Chris. He sits back down. "Well, how do you think you're going to solve

this problem in the long term, then? You need to figure out who these people are and why they're following you."

"I told you," says Lanna. "They're fucking spooks, CIA, Camp Peary nuts—"

"They're not CIA," he says. "There's no way a spook would wait on my doorstep for you, and then follow us into a restaurant where he could be recognized—sloppy."

"Then who the fuck is it?" she asks.

"How the hell should I know?" He lets out a long sigh. "So what do you want to do?"

"Go back to your place," she says.

"All right," he says.

The next time the waitress comes by, Lanna pays the check and they leave. The bald guy pretends not to notice them walking out the door.

On the way back to Chris's place, they stop at the grocery store. Lanna insists on buying him some provisions, and he's too smart to refuse her. Maybe he won't take her money, but he's desperate enough to let her buy him groceries. He picks up a couple of extra jars of peanut butter on top of everything else and they take the bus back to his place.

When they get there, they unpack his groceries and chat about who might be following her. Lanna still thinks it could be spooks, but she's starting to consider the feds too. Then again, maybe it's the mob, because even though she thought she got away clean after skimming from their laundering operation a couple of years back, there's a small chance they could have traced her via some exploit or other she learned about this year. They continue to speculate, and at the same time, they fill Chris' cupboards with more stuff than they've held since he moved in. When they get to the peanut butter, Chris takes two jars and heads for the door.

"Come on," he says.

"Where are we going?" asks Lanna.

"You'll see. Just don't freak out, okay?"

"I'm not making any promises," she says, and follows him out the door.

They head down the hallway to the stairwell, and, when they get there, Chris starts climbing, taking the steps two at a time. Lanna keeps up with him no problem, even though her legs are a lot shorter. The high metabolism has its benefits.

"Come on," she says. "Tell me where we're going."

"The roof," Chris says. "We're going to make an apology on behalf of the human race."

"What?"

But Chris isn't giving any more away. They climb to the top, the tenth floor. By the time they get there, Chris is sweating, and Lanna looks like she's just warming up.

"Here we are," says Chris, breathy from the climb. He opens the door to the roof.

It is packed with potted plants. There are rows of tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers. A few young trees, too. Chris isn't sure, but he thinks they're apple trees. Ivy has attached itself to the outside edges of the concrete roof. In the corner, there is what looks like a small pile of rubble. Chris heads over. On his way, he can see that someone has made a big pile of dirt in one corner of the roof. It looks like a few things are beginning to sprout in it.

Lanna is close behind him. "What is this?" she asks. "I didn't know someone was gardening up here."

"Neither did I," says Chris.

As they near the rubble, they hear a chittering noise. The leaves rustle, and soon, four squirrel-things have scurried in front of the rubble pile. They stand on their hind legs in front of it, ready to protect whatever might be inside. One of the squirrels has a long, curved piece of glass in its hand. The end it is holding has been wrapped in a thin strip of leather. It must seem like Excalibur to the little guy.

"Holy shit," says Lanna. "They have thumbs."

Chris gives her a look, and she shuts up. Then he gets down on his knees and sets the jars of peanut butter on the ground.

"I know one of you got hurt today," he says. "I'm sorry for that. I just wanted you to know that we're not all like that. I stopped them as soon as I knew what they were doing."

The squirrel-things chatter anxiously. The one with the glass waves it around in what seems meant as a menacing gesture.

"I understand that you're upset," he says. "You should be. People can be real assholes. Just so you'll understand that we're not all assholes, I've brought you a couple of gifts." Chris slowly moves his hands to one of the peanut butter jars, and unscrews the lid. He sticks his finger in the peanut butter, pulls it out, and licks it off. "See?" he asks. "It's good. I know you like it, because one of you took some from my apartment. These jars of peanut butter are my gift to you." He gently pushes the jars of peanut butter toward the squirrels. Then Chris gets up, and carefully backs away.

"Come on," he whispers to Lanna. "We're leaving now."

"Okay," she says, still staring at the squirrel-things. He has to lead her by the arm back to the door and down the stairs.

"My god," she says. "I thought you were losing your mind."

"I know," he says. "I thought you were losing yours, too. About the spooks."

"Yeah, I know," she says.

They go back down the stairs, taking their time, both lost in thought. Chris thinks to himself that it was a good idea for him to make a peace offering. He hates to think what one of those stealthy little buggers could accomplish with a piece of glass in the middle of the night. Lanna is still trying to accept that the squirrel-things exist.

Eventually, they get back to Chris's apartment.

"Coffee?" he asks as he unlocks the door.

"Hell yes," she says.

The rest of the afternoon is relatively peaceful. They drink coffee. He stretches another canvas, hoping to recreate his thumbed squirrel piece before Rico's show. They discuss what might happen if the squirrels declared war on the city. It would be ugly, they agreed. Much would depend on how many of the creatures there were. If there were enough of them, they could probably slit the throats of half the population in a single night. "Yeah," Lanna says during the conversation. "The peanut butter was a good idea."

They chat until dusk, when there is a knock at the door. Chris goes and takes a look through the peephole. It's the bald guy, and he looks annoyed.

"It's that guy," he whispers to Lanna. "The spook."

"Shit," she says. "Quick, where can I hide?"

"I don't have a lot of cupboard space anymore," he says. "I think we'd better just find out what he wants."

Chris grabs the air rifle from where it leans against the wall and pumps it a few times. It's pathetic, but it's all he's got.

"What do you want?" he yells through the door.

"I just want to talk to Lanna Stevens," he says. "I have a message for her."

"Why have you been following her?" asks Chris.

"She doesn't have an address," says the guy. "I have strict instructions that the message is to be delivered in person, and confidentially. I have to get close enough to talk to her, and she moves around so goddamn fast that it's almost impossible. I've been trying to deliver this message for about a week."

Chris looks at Lanna. "So what do you think?" he whispers.

"Who do you work for?" yells Lanna through the door.

"I have to deliver my message confidentially," says the bald guy. "Or it's my ass."

"Well, Chris isn't going to leave me alone, so you're going to have to say what you have to say in front of him."

"Can I at least come in so I don't have to yell my confidential message through the door?" The poor guy was getting exasperated.

Lanna looks at Chris. He shrugs. "Makes sense," he says. "People still communicate by courier when they want something secure."

"Yeah," she says. "Let him in."

Chris opens the door, but keeps the air rifle trained on him as he walks in. The guy is taken aback at first. Then he gets a better look at the weapon.

"Is that an air rifle?" he asks.

"No," lies Chris.

"Buddy, it has 'air rifle' written on the side."

"Well, maybe it is," says Chris, "But it's still gonna hurt if I get you in the eye."

The bald guy shrugs, and walks over to Lanna. He reaches into his in-side jacket pocket, and there's a loud pop. The bald guy yells.

"What the fuck!" he screams. He's holding the side of his face. "Will you put that thing away? I've got something to give her, all right? I swear to god that I'm not going to hurt either of you." He rubs his cheek. "Jesus, that stings. I'm glad you didn't get me in the eye."

"Just say what you have to say, and get out," says Chris.

"Ms. Stevens, I'm here to offer you a job on behalf of my employer, Mr. Sakata of Biosoft Industries. As a gesture of his good will, he has autho-rized me to give you two hundred thousand dollars." He shoots a nasty look at Chris. "That is, as long as your friend will let me give it to you."

Lanna is intrigued. She nods at Chris, who lowers the air rifle. The bald guy reaches into his inside jacket pocket again, winces a little, then slow-ly pulls his hand out again. As it emerges, it is holding a slip of white pa-per with a card paper-clipped to it. He holds it out to Lanna, who accepts it gingerly. It's a cashier's check for two hundred thousand dollars.

"If you are interested in his offer, please contact him via the informa-tion on the card that is included with his gift."

Lanna slides the card out to get a look at it. "Thanks a lot," she says.

"Just doing my job," he says, unhappily.

There is a knock at the door. Chris looks over to the door, then back over at the bald guy, still unwilling to take the bead off.

"Chris," says Lanna. "It's okay. Why don't you go see who's at the door?"

Chris hesitates a moment. Then he lowers the gun, and walks to the door. He looks through the peephole. "What do you want?" he yells.

"My kid says you took his rifle," yells someone from the other side.

Chris opens the door. A large black man is standing there. His hair is very short, like he usually shaves his head, but hasn't had time to keep it up. He has big cheeks with pockmarks. "That my boy's rifle?" he asks, pointing to the gun that Chris still holds.

"Yep," says Chris. "That my painting?" asks Chris, pointing at the card-board tube under the man's arm.

"Yep," says the man. He holds out the tube, Chris takes it, and gives him the rifle.

"You just tell him not to shoot those squirrels. They're dangerous." The kid's dad looks at Chris strangely, then turns and walks away.

The bald guy decides to use the door while it's open. "Nice meeting you," he says and quickly exits.

Lanna and Chris are left looking at each other.

"I might get you that house out of principle," says Lanna. "I just can't get rid of this shit fast enough." She

takes another look at her check and shakes her head.

"We went over that already," says Chris. He goes to the counter and pours himself another cup of coffee. "I never knew that you didn't get yourself a place after you moved out."

"Yeah," she says. "I had one for a while, but it just seemed like a waste. I don't have much stuff, and I'm over here most of the time anyway."

"That's true," he says. "But where do you sleep? You're not over here every night."

"I don't sleep every night," she says. "Maybe about one in four."

Chris looks concerned. "You need to get off those stims," he says. "They're messing you up."

"I know," she says. "I didn't take any today."

"Then let's get some sleep," he says.

Before Chris even opens his eyes the next morning, he notices the smell. It is unmistakable, and his first thought is, why? Why, after his generous gift of two jars, did they enter his apartment to steal more? But then, as his eyes adjust to the morning light and focus on the propped up canvas in the middle of the room, he understands.

"Lanna," he says, jostling her a little. "Lanna, you've gotta wake up. I need to shellac this thing right now."

"What?" she asks. "What are you talking about?"

"Take a look at this," he says, pointing to the canvas in the middle of the room.

"My god," she says. "It's gorgeous." She goes over to examine the canvas. "The texture and detail are amazing." She sniffs at the air suddenly. "But I guess I don't get your choice of medium."

"It wasn't me," he says.

Lanna's eyes get big. "No shit?"

"No shit," says Chris. "Come on, we have to get this shellacked so it'll keep."

The next day, at Rico's art opening, the intelligentsia are milling around. They are mildly interested in the various condiment creations. It is a novel medium, but surely, they agree, not one to come into widespread use. However, their tune changes when they get to the centerpiece of the exhibit, a comparison piece of sorts. One woman, a local art critic, says, "it really showcases the power of condiments to convey texture and shape, and contrasts them with the power of traditional paint to portray color."

The exhibit consists of two pieces side by side. Their subject is the same—a strange squirrel with bony thumbs on its paws. One is done in the style of pixelism, the other, in peanut butter. A wealthy philanthropist at the event observes that "while the pixelism piece does an excellent job at showing the light of intelligence in the creature's eyes, the peanut butter piece is incredible at portraying the grain of its fur, and depth of facial features."

A famous collector, before purchasing the set, explained his motivations by saying that "while the squirrel in peanut butter seems to be holding a sword of some kind, the squirrel in paint has been defaced with an overly large mustache and beard. There is little doubt in my mind that these differences have as much or more import than the similarities. These contrasts have, more than any other characteristics, convinced me to buy the set, if for no other reason than that they might be set side by side as long as I live, their intersections and dissimilarities more ripe for the viewer's consumption."

The set sells for more money than all the other condiment pieces combined. Rico looks for Chris to tell him the good news, but he has already left with Lanna. They wanted to hit the art supply store before it closed. Chris intends to leave some oil paints on the roof overnight.

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