

Louisa May Alcott's Priceless Relics (But Gayer)

It was a cold, dry Tuesday when we visited the Bay State History Museum. The building was small but full of self-important pillars, situated alone on a grassy hill about fifteen minutes out of Boston. It wasn't the sort of place where I usually hung out, to say the least. I insisted on picking up Hyun-joo at his school, despite the state of my busted-up Jeep, and he texted the whole way to the museum. I didn't know it at the time, but he had chosen the time and place very carefully.

A burst of warm air hit us as we walked through the door. The faux-marble antechamber was barren except for the receptionist, who

was reading a paperback and had her feet up on the desk. I handed her enough money for both of us - I didn't ask Hyun-joo if I could pay for him, but I figured he would say something if he objected - and put on a smile. The receptionist gave me a pamphlet and grunted, which I optimistically interpreted as "enjoy your visit."

I threw away the pamphlet and looked for Hyun-joo. He was still examining the plastic sign by the entrance.

Welcome to The Bay State History Museum!

Please do not touch:

- *The exhibits*
- *Or take pictures of them*

"Did you see this?" said Hyun-joo. "It's written like a list, but there's no parallelism."

I laughed. "They should fire whoever's in charge of signography around here."

I looked at Hyun-joo, expecting a reaction, but he seemed enraptured by the sign. He had recently gotten a buzz cut, which I was still getting used to. He was wearing a denim jacket over his usual T-shirt and black jeans, and he still had his bookbag on. I wanted to think he had dressed a little nicer for me, but maybe he was just cold. In any case, I felt a little stupid in my borrowed dress shirt and jacket. I undid a collar button when he wasn't looking.

He hummed vaguely and walked deeper into the museum. "Are you coming?" he said.

I looked skeptically at the sign, hoping to discover the secret to captivating Hyun-joo. The only thing it had to tell me was to avoid touching and photography.

I caught up to him by a portrait of a grim-looking woman who the placard identified as Louisa May Alcott. When Hyun-joo noticed I was there, he said, "Here's that dumb exhibit I was telling you about."

"Interesting," I said, gazing at the glass display cases with what I hoped was a scholarly expression. "You're not a fan of her art?"

"You mean her writing?"

"Oh, yeah, that." I laughed again, but Hyun-joo was already examining something else.

"Look, it's a homeopathic medicine kit that belonged to Alcott. Can you believe people actually buy into that crap? My mom used to be super into it. Making home remedies and stuff."

I looked. The underwhelming leather case sat next to a pair of faded sketches and a lock of hair, as if that was something worth playing fifteen dollars to see. The label said *Louisa May Alcott's Priceless Relics*.

"Imagine being so famous someone steals a piece of your hair," I said.

"People try to do that to K-Pop stars all the time," said Hyun-joo. "It's a little creepy."

"Is that what happened to your hair?"

Instead of responding, Hyun-joo picked up an old manuscript of *Little Women* that was sitting on a pedestal.

"Hyun-joo," I said, startled.

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing? Didn't you read the sign?"

"I just want to look inside," he said. He flipped through the pages, smiling down at it like he didn't when I cracked a joke. I was worried he was planning on stealing it. I guiltily thrust my hands into my pockets and looked out of the display room, up at the dome-shaped camera, into Louisa May Alcott's dour eyes. Could my presence here get me charged as an accessory?

"Louisa May Alcott," said Hyun-joo. "Elvis. Alexander the Great. Do you think they became famous because they deserved it? Or do you think they were just at the right place at the right time to become a hero?"

I scratched my head. "Uh, I don't think Alexander the Great was much of a hero."

"He must have been a hero to somebody," he said. "Else we wouldn't call him *the Great*."

I wracked my brain for what remained of my high school history lessons. "Didn't he burn down a library?"

Hyun-joo put down the book. "I like Alcott's writing," he said, "But I don't think we need 'priceless relics' to commemorate it. Like, they're just things, you know? She's a person who lived and died, like everyone else. This could be anyone's hair."

"Yeah, totally," I said, feeling a little lost. "I bet it's fake."

"Mhm," he said, wandering out of the room. "Want to see the Civil War exhibit? I heard it's super boring."

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I've never been able to keep up with Hyun-joo, even since I first met him. It was about a month ago, when I was working at a big bookstore in Boston. Ironic, since I hadn't read a book for fun since fifth grade, but it was easy work and it paid all right. It was almost time to leave for the day and meet up with the guys, maybe play some basketball, when he came ringing through the door. He smiled in my direction, and I smiled back. I realize now it was a coincidence - he was equally as likely to have smiled at the cash register.

He was very cute, which got me wondering if he was gay. I decided to busy myself in the shelves where I could discreetly observe him. I peeked around a corner and found him kneeling in the manga section, flipping through a book. He still had his hair back then, and he wore a dark flannel shirt. I thought I recognized him, but I couldn't remember where from. He glanced quickly around, then shoved the book into his bookbag.

Surprised, I cleared my throat, and Hyun-joo gave me a startled look. I think that moment of mutual astonishment is the only time he ever looked at me directly in the eyes.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" he said, offering me the book with both hands.

"It's okay," I said. "Just don't do it again."

"I won't, I promise."

He looked so sincere and repentant, on his knees like a churchgoer at confession, that I let him off without telling my supervisor. I took the book and escorted him to the exit, where he apologized again and hurried down the sidewalk. It was only when I went to re-shelve the manga that I realized five others were missing from the same section.

I saw Hyun-joo the next morning on the bus to work. He was sitting at the front, fixated on his phone. It turns out he took the same route as me every day, which made me feel a little stupid for not recognizing him. I sat down across from him and introduced myself, intending to confront him about the books.

"Oh, hey," he said. "You work at the book store, right? I'm Hyun-joo."

"Uh, yeah. Nice to meet you for real."

"Yeah, nice to meet you," he said, looking back down at his phone. "Have you ever thought about going digital? There's a lot of bookless libraries nowadays. It's a lot more sustainable and less likely to catch on fire, but people are *super* attached to printed paper."

"Cool," I said.

He went on like that for a while, swiping left and right on his phone as he talked. I wasn't sure how to bring up the subject of the theft, but he must have noticed my indecision because he looked up and said, "Do you want those mangas back?"

"Oh," I said, caught by surprise. "No, I guess not."

"Okay," he said.

Hyun-joo and I started talking every morning on the bus. He would choose whatever bizarre topic he felt like discussing that day, and I would nod and occasionally ask questions and let the bus bump me around. Over time, I found out he went to some liberal arts school in Boston where he studied history. He was interning at a public relations firm, but only so he didn't have to go home for the summer. He lived with his father, who was Korean.

"He's always yelling at me about stupid things like what I eat, or who I hang out with, or whatever," he said. "I can't stand him. The only reason I haven't gotten my own place yet is that I'm still mooching money off of him."

"Sounds rough," I said.

"He wants me to be a doctor. Can you imagine that?"

"What's wrong with being a doctor?" I said. "I bet it pays well."

"Spend my life fixing other peoples' problems?" he said. "God. No thank you."

I did some snooping online and concluded that he was probably gay, if not out. The guys told me I should ask him out, but I couldn't figure out how. I'd never dated an Asian guy before. I know that shouldn't matter, but it made me nervous anyway.

One day on the bus, he got the jump on me by asking if I wanted to visit a museum. It annoyed me for some reason that he had asked first, but I said yes, of course. He smiled again - this time, I think, aiming at me on purpose - before giving me his number and hopping out at his stop.

I spent the rest of that ride remembering his smile and wondering why he had chosen the Bay State History Museum for a first date, of all places. I thought maybe he wanted to go to a museum because he saw himself in one of the exhibits someday. But, as it turns out, I didn't understand Hyun-joo's motivations at all.

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"The museum closes in five minutes," I said, checking my phone. There was no response, so I poked my head around the corner. Hyun-joo was standing in front of a rather graphic exhibit about the Boston Massacre, staring up at the ceiling.

"Did you know there's no sprinklers in this building?" he said.

"Why, are you worried Alexander the Great will pillage the Bay State History Museum?"

Unbelievably, he laughed. I gave myself a mental fist bump for that.

"We'd better head out," I said. "The museum closes in five minutes."

"Yeah, I heard you," he said.

He adjusted his bookbag and started following me to the exit. "We've only been here for, like, thirty minutes," I said. "Not much of a first date, huh?"

"I guess," he said.

"Do you want to, like, get ice-cream after this?"

Hyun-joo was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I don't know if I'd call it a date."

"Oh," I said, stuffing my hands into my pocket. "Sorry."

"It's okay," he said.

Internally, I was reeling, desperately trying to figure out where I went wrong. Had Hyun-joo been leading me on, or was I just that much of an idiot? I wondered why he'd brought me along in the first place. Just to ask me questions and not let me answer?

"This museum is kind of a drag, isn't it?" Hyun-joo said. "It's funny what they consider art nowadays. Have you ever heard of sand mandalas? In Tibet they make beautiful art out of sand and then destroy it. It's supposed to be spiritual or something."

"Cool," I said.

"Suppose this museum burned down tomorrow," he said. "I mean, totally leveled. Do you think that would be art?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Me neither. It's interesting to think about, anyway."

We arrived back at the antechamber, where the receptionist had fallen asleep. "I have to pee," said Hyun-joo. "I'll be right back."

I nodded, and Hyun-joo disappeared into the bathroom. I sat down to wait next to the dumb *Please do not touch* sign. In retrospect, I probably could have figured out what he was up to then and there. Maybe even stopped him. At the time, there was a vague suspicion in my head, nothing more. I guess I had other things on my mind.

I don't know why I ever thought he was interested in me. Romance was probably the last thing on his mind when he invited me to the museum. No, Hyun-joo just needed someone to unload his weird poetry onto, a receptive stranger to hear his confession. And, I guess, someone to pay for his admission. He wanted at least one person to

know what he'd done, and I happened to be at the right place at the right time. Like Alexander the Great.

It was all over the news the next day. The fire destroyed dozens of valuable items and damaged many more, costing the museum hundreds of thousands of dollars. Thankfully, no one was hurt. I guess the receptionist woke up in time. The police attributed the fire to arson, but were unable to identify the culprit due to the museum's "poor maintenance" of the security system. Louisa May Alcott's priceless relics, unfortunately, did not make it.

Hyun-joo and I made it all the way out of the parking lot before the alarm went off. I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a thin column of smoke rising from the building.

"That's super weird," said Hyun-joo, looking out the back window with a grin on his face. "Good thing we got out when we did."