The Abyss in Five Parts

1.

They say fake money is real money until it isn’t, but the latter part of the logic did not concern Vincent. If anything, the first half of that axiom can, and should, be capitalized. It is an open invitation to exploit the illusion of authenticity, a market for cons, fakes, falsified documents. Have you ever been in a doctor’s office and sat in between the unorganized basket of old magazines and bland lollipops and wondered how a small, two room office in the middle of a strip mall can afford such a beautiful impressionist painting from an artist you’ve never heard of? What about rich folk and their strange art, the abstract stuff that nobody understands but everyone pretends to, and the only value it has is the value assigned to it, of how difficult it is to get a “piece” from the revolutionary “so and so”. People pay not for authenticity, but for the illusion of authenticity, and it is here that Vincent had beaten his art degree into a business, had abused the engine of creativity that fueled his younger years and propelled him to a prestigious art school into nothing more than a very particular and colorful conveyer belt. There was money in duplicity, and Vincent had long sold his soul to bathe in it like a diving Scrooge McDuck. He had lived the starving artist life, had set it down like an uninteresting record in the bottom of some muggy store basement to rot.

Vincent only needed four items for his business. His computer, in which to process payments to whatever pediatric wanted a replicant of a famous painting or to some rich person who wants to convince their rich friends they have a fragment of Gogh’s soul on their dining room wall. He needed his paints and aisle, obviously. He also needed his M.A in Fine Arts, which was worth more in encouragement than any glass of whisky. This served as an emblem that he had succeeded in his own way, that he had flourished behind the closed door of his dreams of becoming a famous painter, of having his own gallery.

The process was simple. An order came in and provided a digital copy of their selected piece. Vincent quoted them, had them pay half. Then, by hand, he copied their desired picture onto a canvas of their choosing. He even framed it. Just like that. What made Vincent special and the most successful in this field where others have failed and succumbed to shame, turned into lepers of the art world, or even gone to prison, is that Vincent *is* special. His photographic memory and surgeon’s hands, which his parents had attempted to boot him through that door before realizing Vincent’s attraction to fine art would eat at him like a cancer if he did not pursue it, provided a perfect witches’ brew in duplicate in as a 1:1 copy. He could even forge signatures, which had helped him nab a well-priced studio apartment in the middle of New York City’s hipster neighborhood. No style was foreign or challenging to him; he had perfectly replicated Dali’s *Persistence of Memory* just last week, had been paid handsomely on five different occasions to copy Monet’s *Water Lilies* to the exact scale. There are times when Vincent is in creative flow, where his muscles coordinate perfectly with the strokes and brush work, when he wondered if his clients even care about risking their reputation as art collectors when revealing a duplication of a famous artwork. There are some pieces of art that have permanent residence in the museum circuit, traveling all around the world for a high price to simply hang on a wall and be worshipped, and didn’t the guest of these art collectors know that Wood’s *American Gothic* cannot exist simultaneously in the Louvre and in a Mulholland Drive mansion? The rich all play a strange game, one which Vincent is fine to help fuel and don’t forget, the emperor wears no clothes.

He had been painting a replication of Hopper’s *Nighthawks* when a knock shook him from his creative stupor. He almost ruined the face of the business suited man talking to his scarlet neighbor. Vincent growled and placed the paintbrush into the murky water. He glanced at the work in progress and congratulated himself on its perfect quality, winking at the art school degree which watched him in confusion on the wall. One might say he was selling out, participating in an inherently capitalistic dynamic between art and the artist, but to that Vincent flicks jism of watercolor and said, *Look, I can paint quite literally, like the best of them.* Whatever one needed to become a great artist, Vincent sure as hell had *it*.

His smock crinkled with the scabs of colored sunspots as he crossed the room. The chain stopped the door from swinging open, and Vincent found himself staring face-to-face with an Easter Island head, his face obscured underneath his fedora and the exposed lightbulb in the hallway that shook like a pendulum with every passing subway.

The man shoved a tiny polaroid in between the fissure of the door. “Is this you?”

Vincent snapped at the picture like a crab, held it away from him. It is a picture of him at a bar, waiting for a drink. This must have been taken months ago. Vincent somehow wooed the bartender and slept in her bed that night, then promptly realized her personality only went as far as alcohol could propel. He had not been back since. He wondered if this man was her father, or if she died and he was on the receiving end of a detective serial.

“Is this you?” The man asked again, his voice stony, reminding Vincent of the slow crawl of the old dial-up modems.

Vincent felt checkmated. He could not deny that he was looking at himself. A sudden dread fell over him, and he ran a mental finger over his conscious filing cabinet, searching for anyone who might have been looking for him, anyone he might have frustrated enough to search for him. This was no police officer or detective.

“Yes, that’s me,” Vincent relented.

“You should invite me in,” said the man.

“Not without a badge,” Vincent attempted to twist his face into adamancy, but the pockmarks of navy blue and marigold yellow made him look more like the *Starry Night*.

The man appeared nonplussed. His Easter Island brow creased only slightly, but Vincent thought it was an animal quality, like a dog instinctively curling its ears at danger.

“If you don’t let me in now, I promise that you will not want me to return.”

This had gone weedy, and Vincent knew when a path was forked for him, made him decide before the fork ended in getting fucked. He closed the door and before unlatching the chain drew his cellphone and pre-dialed 911. He had enough confidence in himself to fend off this fedora wearing weirdo for at least a couple of minutes.

Vincent led the man to the couches, which were really a series of mismatched hand-me-downs and hardly comfortable places to sit, an island in a sea of works in progress. Vincent hardly had guests, but when he did they seemed awed by the simulacrum of famous paintings, even to the extent of people thinking Vincent was a high-profile cat burglar, or a shadow artist, which was a little more closer to the truth. This man sat down and rested his elbows on his shoulder. He looked supremely uncomfortable in his suit, as if it muscles begged to be flexed and shred its cottony prison, just once, like an angry itch.

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

“I’m here on business.”

“Okay,” Vincent said, figuring he would unpack this exchange later. If there was one.

The man clasped his fingers together, his broad shoulder tensing in their multi-layered enclosure. “You can call me Mr. Ilsmuth. I would like to hire your services.”

Vincent relaxed a little bit. He still didn’t like this approach, but talking about work was a space that he could breathe a little better in. He asked his quoting questions: “What kind of painting? What style? Is it an old painting or a new one? How big is it? If it’s the size of *Lilly Pads* it will take a little longer.”

The man pulled a folded piece of printer paper from his breast pocket and handed it across the paint scabbed carpet to Vincent. He unfolded it like a Chinese Fortune. There was a picture on the arctic white page, printed as if taken from a phone camera or pulled from Google Images. Aside from the obvious creases of being folded and the quality of the photo, the painting seemed no more difficult than any of his other commissions, especially with the still unfinished *The School of Athens* and *Nude Descending* looking from behind the couches like two perched parrots. The painting was abstract, almost too abstract, actually. It was a blank canvas with a myriad of two-dimensional diamonds, all in different, yet easily attainable colors, hues and shades that he had mixed with little difficulty before. Some of the diamonds seemed to circulate, like the vortex of a draining sink, around an equally flat circle the color of ox-blood. Vincent had seen many art in his time, both as a once aspiring painter during his training and the odd years before founding this profession, and now as a replicator. One might argue that this latter role gave Vincent a more intimate relationship with these pieces of famous artworks, because the time it takes to replicate as perfect as he does bordered on worship of the masters, of the elite club in the cultural consciousness that has always just been out of Vincent’s reach, the bar hovering permanently, tauntingly, at the edge of his fingertips, a modern-day Tantalus. Modern abstract work was more challenging with the same mental acrobatics that make tattooing words instead of pictures the more challenging of the two; mistakes are more noticeable, and the call to perfection is more exact. Not that Vincent made mistakes. He had *it*.

“This shouldn’t take more than a couple of weeks. Probably two,” Vincent said, handing back the photo. “However, you are behind a couple of other clients. I’ll let you know when production begins.”

“I would like the painting completed by the end of these two weeks,” he said, his face stony.

“I just said-”

“I will pay double,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, “to be first in line.”

Vincent nodded, looked back at his other works in progress, and decided that he needed the money more than those clients needed their silly fake art. With a commission like Mr. Ilsmuth’s, he could take a break from forging for a good while. Maybe he’d go to London or Paris, learn the arts there. Maybe meet someone.

“Okay. Yeah. I would still need a couple of days to get the paints ready and blow up the picture.”

“No need,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, standing. He reached into another pocket and placed a plane ticket on the table. “You’ll make the replica at my estate. You’ll find you have everything you need there.”

Vincent examined the ticket. It was for Los Angeles. The plane left tomorrow.

“I hope you can respect why I’m not taking you on my private plane. Having us seen together would arouse suspicions and neither of us deserve that.”

This, Vincent understood. He looked at the invitation like Charlie and his golden ticket, thinking that he had not been to Los Angeles in a while. After a couple seconds of thought, Vincent said, “Okay. I’ll be there.”

“My driver will pick you up at airport. The ride will be bumpy.”

“I can’t imagine it would be any more uncomfortable then living in a New York City apartment,” Vincent said, laughing to diffuse the cold seriousness of Mr. Ilsmuth.

When he did not emote Vincent instead offered his hand and, in typical business fashion, Mr. Ilsmuth received it with a robotic like precision. His hands were strangely smooth, as if the lines of cartography from age had not impressed upon him, as if his hands had no need to weather themselves in the daily milieu of life.

On his way out of the apartment Mr. Ilsmuth swept a robotic gaze across the unfinished works. His eyes stopped at Rembrandt van Rijn’s elemental and mighty work *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Mr. Ilsmuth tilted his head, clasped his hands behind his back as if engaging with the replica at a gallery. “The original was stolen in 1990. It remains missing, you know.”

“Then the new owner of this painting is in for quite a surprise.”

At this Mr. Ilsmuth snickered. It sounded artificial, as if someone had taught him degrees of laughter. “You’re really quite good, Mr. Tarrot. I look forward to your work.”

2.

Vincent stepped out of the airplane into the Los Angeles sunset. Skies looked different in this part of the country, and Vincent was toying with the prospect of moving out here. His taking residence with Mr. Ilsmuth might prove dually beneficial as he can test out the lifestyle here as an L.A. artist, which is of similar ilk to the East Coast art scene, but different. Besides, with the money that Mr. Ilsmuth is offering, he can even cancel his previous orders and take a couple years vacation where he can reenter the gallery circuit, reinstitute himself into the starving artist lifestyle without the actual starvation, which is the one of the factors that stopped his first go around in the first place.

Mr. Ilsmuth instructed Vincent to take a cab to the nearest In-n-Out, not to take part in a self-destructive gastronomic cherry popping but to meet the actual driver who will take him from the parking lot to Mr. Ilsmuth’s estate on Mulholland, which can only mean that Vincent’s studio will be nothing short of magnificent. Vincent ate a greasy hamburger and wondered what all the fuss is about, and in the yellow glow of the drive through and the increasingly beaming lights from the highway, Vincent realized how paranoid Mr. Ilsmuth must be to construct such an elaborate plan of transport for him. No first-class ticket and no driver waiting in the terminal, which to Vincent was a loss opportunity to live out a fantasy. Vincent felt like a package, and in some way, he was. His career path demanded secrecy and a collective wink across the table of a dinner party or from the sides of a room holding champagne glasses.

A shitty sedan pulled up to the curb. The driver rolled down the window, rested one beefy sausage link of an arm on the door. He asked Vincent’s name and Vincent replied. The driver unlocked the door and Vincent got in. The two of them did not talk the entire trip, which was fine with Vincent. He gazed at the palm trees pointing into the sky. He gawked at every limousine, which in Los Angeles contained a different power than seeing them in New York City. He even grew frustrated at the crawling traffic. The car eventually drew into a steady ascent, like the beginning of a roller coaster, and the city smog levied downwards and revealed the glistening diamond city at the base of the valley, stretching into the sea, the Hollywood sign winking on the cliff façade, Malibu and Santa Monica discarding its family friendly auras and donning clothes for rooftop bars and snuck starlit kisses.

Mr. Ilsmuth’s estate is the love child for modern architecture and Los Angeles sentimentality. A series of interconnecting squares resembling more a village than a single domicile, the house rested on top of a sloping façade facing the water and the palm trees below. Glass skirted the house like a hula dancing chandelier and long observatory decks ran the length three times as a long as Vincent’s apartment back in New York. The sedan drove to the gates and two men in business suits allowed entry. When Vincent stepped out of the car two men carried his minimal luggage into the house and the sedan zipped off, the driver cradling a thick wad of Benjamins. Vincent looked up at the house and it looked down at him like a patient idol.

Mr. Ilsmuth greeted the forger at the double doored entrance, bringing him into the foyer. Before Vincent could comment on the house or his accommodations, Mr. Ilsmuth led him into a study looking out into the ocean. Above the fireplace was the actual picture that Mr. Ilsmuth had taken a gritty snapshot of and printed out to show Vincent just a day earlier. Without the granularity and filter of an ad hoc photo, the picture looked grand and inspiring. The blood-colored circle beckoned him into the void like a harlot’s fish netted legs behind a curtain, the diamonds signified universes beyond Vincent’s logical comprehension, communicable and communicated only by *feeling*, the arctic blankness of the space balanced the composition of the piece like the scales of justice. That was what Vincent loved about art, the feeling of elemental, primordial bliss that evoked a wordless expression. It is a trifecta relationship – viewer, artist, the work. Whomever this artist was, he had *it*. Especially since the composition itself is not necessarily a challenge; Vincent had replicated Monet and Pollack. The Kleine’s of the world are essentially a free ticket around the board to GO, the two hundred bucks included.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Mr. Ilsmuth said, hands on his hips. “It is called *The Abyss in Five Parts*.”

The pair stood adjacent to one another, head tilted up, as if at a gallery. Vincent nodded. Then he remembered where he was, and why he was here.

He said, “I’ve never been asked to replicate a painting that is already in someone’s possession. You want two of them?”

Mr. Ilsmuth pursed his lips and furrowed his brows, forming a ridge not unlike the balcony at the end of the estate looking over the Valley; straight and concrete. Vincent wondered if he had offended the man.

“There is only one, Mr. Tarrot. This piece was the last piece created by my father, days before he died and in a frenzy of exploding synapses ignited by his dementia.”

“It’s a beautiful piece,” Vincent agreed, although he is not sure what he was agreeing to.

“It was given to me on his death bed, hours before he passed away,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, his face resisting the strain of anguish. “He was lucid then, using my first name, Joseph. There were moments when I thought his brief grasp of clarity might reverse the condition of a dying man on a death bed, so clear was his mind. Then, as he died, he pulled me close and said to me ‘you are my favorite son, Joseph. If I could give you the world again, I would. In my will I attached my last and final painting, it is yours.”

“A final gift,” Vincent said, “very sentimental.”

“Yes,” Mr. Ilsmuth rounded to the bar cart and poured two glasses of whiskey, handing one to Vincent. He settled into a chair and investigated the fire, his stony gaze smoldering. “But on the day of the will, it was revealed that the designation of this beautiful work was determined to go to Jacob, my brother. My twin brother.”

“I see,” Vincent said.

Mr. Ilsmuth popped from his chair and rounded to the bay window, putting one hand in his pocket. He seemed unable to sit still, flexing his fingers like a frustrated child. Vincent saw Mr. Ilsmuth in a new light, then, no longer a man whose considerable wealth hardened him from the errs of life but as a toddler with sibling quarrels so deep as to be fundamental to his temperament as an adult.

Mr. Ilsmuth was now pointing into the air now, as if yelling at a figment of his twin brother across the room. “So the painting went to him to sit on his mantel across the Valley, where he mocked me in his own, dubious ways at dinner parties, at soirees, at galas. He knew the painting was for me, and took much delight is catching my envious eye across the room as he explained the origin of the painting, rewriting the story in my presence about how Father bequeathed the painting to him, even though he was not around for his final days, when his only contribution was the time it took to sign a check and cover half of the hospital bills.”

A sudden energy radiating off Mr. Ilsmuth made Vincent begin to think if these explosive emotions are his default state and the stony exterior is a farce. Vincent also remembered to not truly care about these qualms, that a painting like this is a tug-of-war between two brothers who both existed in an echelon of wealth that Vincent cannot personally imagine. Still, he could not help but feel a little emotionally confused, as he could see how a simple dementia laden error might have created a dramatic butterfly effect leading to him waking up in New York just yesterday morning.

Mr. Ilsmuth continued, “So I waited. I waited until my devilish twin had taken his scheduled trip to the Bahamas, scouting his estate with my binoculars in the brushes. I know his code – I’ve been tracking his pattern for months. It’s our birthday, which is also my code. His dogs know me, half his staff can’t tell the difference between us. I spirited the painting away, just for the week, just for the experience of having it in my home where we can be reunited like two long lost lovers. It was a beautiful experience, Mr. Tarrot, to have everything as it should be.”

“I agree,” Vincent said, unsure how to add more sinews to the conversation that Mr. Ilsmuth appeared to be having with himself. “I’m assuming we have a week to recreate the painting before you have to return it to your brother?”

“Return the original to him?” Mr. Ilsmuth strained a smile, like he was taking pity on Vincent’s inability to know all the details of his narrative. “No no, Mr. Tarrot. You are to recreate the painting and the fake will be sent back to Jacob. He won’t know the difference, but I will. I’ll know.”

It was at this point that Vincent wondered if everyone in this stratosphere of wealth is this petty, or if it was a character defect between Mr. Ilsmuth and his brother. As their wealth boomed so must their strange schemes. It brought Vincent a degree of joy to have been put into the middle of this, if only for the novelty.

“Let’s begin,” Vincent said, excited for a challenge.

3.

The studio was twice as large as Vincent’s combined apartment / studio back home. It was equipped with entire walls of paint of any medium, enough stacked canvased to rival the dust collecting bins in a used record store, hand crafted brushes that costed more than Vincent’s rent and then some. It was evident that Mr. Ilsmuth had no intention of allowing Vincent into the house proper, as the studio was also equipped with a high-quality bed, a drawer, and a bathroom with heated tiles, all tucked into the corner. A bar cart, stacked with alcohol, among other forms of hedonism, waited patiently at the other end of the studio. Mr. Ilsmuth told Vincent that if he needed anything, he needed just to ask.

With some help of some waitstaff, *The Abyss in Five Parts* was hung up on a giant aisle in the middle of the room, reminiscent of a nude model. Vincent put on his smock and got to work. The line work was near perfect, the composition elegant yet, admittedly, simple to replicate (Vincent remembered being asked to draw circles and squares in elementary school). The neutral canvas was even painted white, which made the entire venture even easier. Vincent did have some issue with the colors though. The ox-blood circle seemed to possess a shade either too dark for his mixture upon the palette or too light after adding the whites; it seemed impossible to grasp, looking perfectly replicated underneath a certain light but then shifting to an unsightly off kilter color. After watching the Los Angeles sunset carry in plumes of chilled air underneath a purple sky, Vincent decided that he would endeavor the pernicious circle in the morning. Surely the periwinkle and cerulean diamonds would be easier to replicate, he figured. He needed a tiny win. Several hours later Vincent shambled to bed with fingers crusted with the abortions of unrealized colors, the flakes dropping like breadcrumbs.

Mr. Ilsmuth visited in the morning, a servant placing a steaming cup of coffee next to the easel. He inspected the artwork, glancing from Vincent’s recreation to the original and back again, a singular tennis match. Mr. Ilsmuth seemed perturbed by the lack of progress, which to him must have been just an outline of the shapes. He could not see the perfect circle and diamonds, the absolutely accurate positioning to the atomic measure of the composition. It was a superhuman skill that Vincent never expected anyone to notice. Still, it was strange for him to have someone watching the daily progression of his work. It made him feel vulnerable.

“You have six days,” Mr. Ilsmuth said.

“It’ll be done.”

Vincent could not help but feel as if this is a prod in Vincent’s ribs, a reminder that the dynamic between the two of them is employee-employer. A little ghost in the corner of his psyche told Vincent to think twice about doing work in a client’s house in the future.

Two days later Vincent did complete the painting. He had mixed the perfect tonal duplicate of the circle, the light colors of the diamonds. The secret was a little bit of yellow for each of the three colors, and Vincent, after discovering the secret, congratulated the artist for the clever usage of color theory and then damned him for being just so *obvious*. Vincent stared at the indistinguishable duo, proud of himself and disappointed with the artist and the culture which had birthed him. If a gallery would take something so simple, then Vincent wanted no part in the culture. He was quite fine with his forgery, thank you. It allowed him to exist in the underground where the true art exists. But this was later, when the weird rivalry between the Ilsmuth brothers is settled and he can return to his cockroach infested loft.

He brought Mr. Ilsmuth into the studio for a quick review, a curtesy that he had never allowed anyone, not even the people he brought home from the bars. So confident was Vincent that he knew Mr. Ilsmuth would be impressed. In a stroke of confidence, Vincent switched the paintings on the aisle, so that his replica was in the center of the room, standing bold and strong in all its glory, waiting to be worshipped. Mr. Ilsmuth stared at the twin paintings with his arms flat against his sides.

He pointed to the original, resting on the smaller easel, as if on second place. “It doesn’t look like the original.”

Vincent pulled from the recesses of his consciousness every instinct not to become hostile to this criticism. He knew this self-consciousness was the bane of all artists. He asked Mr. Ilsmuth what exactly was incorrect with his production and Mr. Ilsmuth remained silent for many minutes.

Eventually he said, “It just doesn’t have it.”

“Have it?”

“Have *it*. It’s close, but not quite there.”

With that Mr. Ilsmuth left the studio, leaving Vincent standing in front of the twins, mouth agape, wondering just what to make of the strange criticism. What constitutes as *it*? Vincent allowed himself a pour of whiskey (it was 2 o’clock on the East Coast, after all) and pondered this, measuring to the millimeter the placement of the shapes, looking from all angles and in the same light to confirm the colors and ensure their duplicity. It was the same painting, no doubt. Vincent was sure of this. After two hours of loathing Vincent set out to recreate the picture, coming to the same conclusion. He brought Mr. Ilsmuth into the studio.

“Not quite,” Mr. Ilsmuth said.

“It’s the same image,” Vincent said, “a carbon copy.”

“But it’s not Mr. Tarrot,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, tilting his head, “it’s not quite there yet.”

Vincent grumbled and pulled out another canvas. He put on another smock, hoping to squeeze as much money out of Mr. Ilsmuth’s incalculable wealth in laundry fees. He would not know, but Vincent would, and this itself was cause enough for him to understand Mr. Ilsmuth’s reservations. He needed to know that the real is real without compromising on the fake being perceived as real. He turned and faced his version and found nothing aesthetically different between the two paintings. Vincent could even argue that he had done his best work.

So why the fuck did his perfect replication not have *it*?

4.

It was the dawn of the sixth day and Vincent, clad in sunspots of blood and periwinkle colored paint, called Mr. Ilsmuth into the studio. He had not left the studio in four days, existing on food brought into the room and the persistent cloud of paint fumes haunting the surfaces like nuclear fallout. He pointed to the replica with his stained paintbrush, no use in trying to trick his commissioner. Mr. Ilsmuth inspected the picture and rubbed his chin, moving about the room to observe it from all angles. He shook his head.

“How?” Vincent said, taking off his smock and tossing it over a bench like a used towel. He could not resist the ascension in his voice. “It looks the same. Tell me it doesn’t.”

Mr. Ilsmuth remained calm. “It does look the same, Mr. Tarrot. I can’t tell a visual difference.”

Vincent relaxed. He settled into the couch, the twin paintings to his right, Mr. Ilsmuth prowling the studio to his left. “Thank goodness. I’ll be honest, Mr. Ilsmuth, this was more challenging than I thought.”

Mr. Ilsmuth straightened himself. “My brother’s plane experienced…technical difficulties. He had to make a stop on an island, which will delay him an additional week.”

A thought came over Vincent, goods news on top of good news. Having hit his deadline early meant that Vincent could get paid earlier, maybe even stay in the studio and test drive a new life in Los Angeles before submerging into the fine arts scene.

Mr. Ilsmuth turned to Vincent. “You have an additional seven days to complete this task. If you do not, I am afraid I will have to forfeit your commission.”

Vincent sprung from the couch. “You just said I had completed the task. You said the paintings looked the same!”

“They do, but they aren’t.”

“How, Mr. Ilsmuth? How are they so dissimilar to you? I’ve been doing this for years and I have never experienced a contract as difficult as your artistic sense. Your brother will not know the difference. I promise you.”

Mr. Ilsmuth considered this. He furrowed his bold brows, tilted his head to feel a brisk breeze float in from the sea, bringing with it salt and palm. “You make a good point. Yes, this is satisfactory.” He reached into his breast pocket and wiggled out a thick envelop of paper. He handed it across an archipelago of painted tiles. “Thank you, Mr. Tarrot. I apologize for the difficulty I offered as a client.”

Vincent accepted the cash, pressing the envelop between his paint scabbed fingers. They shook hands and Mr. Ilsmuth made his way to the door. He stopped in the threshold, looking too large for the frame, as if the jamb itself moved out of his way to accommodate.

He said, “It’s suffering, I believe.”

Vincent was already at the dresser, preparing to pack his things. “Pardon?”

“The *it*. It’s suffering. You haven’t suffered enough. That’s why you don’t have *it*.”

Vincent, realizing that their relationship is no longer leveraged by commission, allowed himself to become offended by this statement. “I have an M.F.A. from a very prestigious art school. I’ve suffered enough.”

Mr. Ilsmuth shook his head, “Not in the way that the others have. The Goghs, the Pollacks of the world. You’ve just tried really hard to succeed. But you haven’t suffered.”

“Listen-”

“It’s fine, Mr. Tarrot,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, “you’re right. I’ll know, as will my vile brother. He’ll suspect something is off with his version of the painting. That is victory enough for me.”

“But he shouldn’t be able to tell the difference, what matters is that only you can tell the difference. You said so yourself.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Tarrot. Thank you for your services. A driver will take you to the airport directly. No need for the secrecy this time.”

Mr. Ilsmuth left Vincent to stew in his confusion. He started to pace the studio, stepping over little droplets of petrified color, tripping over loose brushes that Vincent wanted Mr. Ilsmuth to pay for someone to clean. He found himself deeply offended by Mr. Ilsmuth’s arrogance, surprised at how deep a cut this man had inflicted. Of course, Vincent had suffered. He had lived off scraps in New York City before finding his forging business. He had worked odd jobs to afford paint and keep his monthly student loan payments from hemorrhaging completely. He lived with roommates. Above that, Vincent had struggled through school, having earned an M.F.A. in a prestigious program that almost broke him. And Mr. Ilsmuth only collected art, never created it. Who was he to critique?

Vincent started to pack his bags angrily, aiming to take the cash and get blisteringly drunk before heading home to his own grimy Gotham. He was done with Los Angeles. The types here did not appreciate his struggles, which meant they did not appreciate his triumphs. He slung his bag over his shoulder and made his way out of the studio, stopping just once to say goodbye to his work. It only seemed right. Now in front of the twin paintings, he jumped from the original to his own, saw his version to be a perfect replica, down to the microscopic etchings. Still, there was something *different* about the pieces beyond aesthetics. His version did indeed lack that certain electricity that booms off canvases, infiltrates the minds of the beholder, flirts with being a potential stolen artefact from a museum robbery like a beautiful woman in a dark alley. Vincent’s duplication was perfect, but the rest of it was not. No one could tell the difference, but as Vincent stood in the front of the paintings, looking at the clone and its genesis, it was not about telling or seeing the difference. It was about *feeling* the difference. And the difference being that with the original composition the anguish and sorrow of the painter evoked from every brush stroke, noxious fumes of tears and doubt and cosmic imbalance gurgled within every splatter of color like a witch’s brew. There was pain within the paint that horrified Vincent, pain that Vincent knew he had never earned or attained. He had struggled, yes, in a way that artist’s struggle on television: cheap bear, sticky hookups, a strange cast of urban characters all staying above financial ruin via odd jobs that fuel wacky and strange cross-pollinating encounters. Vincent had not bled for his art. He had not extracted enough tears in his lifetime to even conceptualize a masterpiece like *The Abyss in Five Parts* in its infancy. That was *it*. That was the magic that Vincent knew he lacked, no matter how prestigious a silly piece of paper could armor him from such a fact. Perhaps this was it, Vincent realized, it was the suffering that made great art, that raw knowledge and skill are merely rungs of a ladder to success and legacy, but do not determine how long the ladder is. Was Vincent doomed to mediocrity, to replicating the work of other masters, instead of forging his own path? Was this what the formal education had given him, had told him, had promised him? Vincent found himself pacing again. He once had dreams of being a great artist. Everyone had told him that he had *it*. He believed it. Until the day he didn’t. Do people with *it* ever have these feelings? Are they ever confronted about having these feelings? Vincent gritted his teeth and stared at the duplicate, cursing under his breath. Had Mr. Ilsmuth not already paid for the picture incent would have taken it to the torch, just like the other aborted “masterpieces” that Vincent had birthed from his own pampered subconscious to live on the grade scale of F-A.

He approached Mr. Ilsmuth in his study. The businessman was sipping a glass of whisky, looking out to the lawns of his estate, one sausage linked arm behind his back. He seemed perpetually uncomfortable.

“I understand about the sorrow,” Vincent said. “How did he suffer?”

“My father suffered horrors that you could not imagine,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, “horrors I could not comprehend.”

Vincent invited himself into the study. He set down his bags and poured himself a drink. “Tell me.”

Mr. Ilsmuth slanted his eyes and tilted his robust cranium. He spoke as if giving Vincent breadcrumbs, careful as to the what the beast before him would do with them. “My father grew up very poor.”

“So did I.”

“He failed a lot. Lost a lot.”

“So did I. I’m sure you have your own series of failures as well.”

“You don’t need to hear the plights of an artist, Mr. Tarrot. I paid your dues.”

“I want to,” Vincent persisted, “I need to figure out the puzzle. Then I’ll repaint the picture and it will be perfect.”

Mr. Ilsmuth attempted a smile. He looked up at the blank space where *The Abyss in Five Parts* previously hung on the mantel, now a bald spot. He sat across from Vincent, stretched the fabric of his tight suit to its limits.

“He didn’t raise the two of us, you know,” Mr. Ilsmuth said, staring now beyond Vincent’s shoulder, getting himself into the trance that Vincent had experienced a week prior.

“Too busy making art?”

“Too busy destroying his soul.”

“With alcohol, drugs?” Vincent found himself leaning forward, enraptured by Mr. Ilsmuth’s oration.

He shook his head. “Philosophy. And psychosis.”

5.

Vincent sat in the studio and consumed tattered pieces of poetry. The taste was not unbearable, but it was bland and hard to get down without grain alcohol, which is precisely what Aldous had committed as his daily eating habits since before Mr. Ilsmuth and his brother were teenagers. After dinner, Vincent walked the studio on shards of broken glass, at first gingerly hopscotching along the walls but then, after learning that Aldous had symbolized the broken glass as a biblical and physical sensation, had since scattered broken bottles and mirrors around the studio like little islands, so it would be a blood tax to engage with the creative spiritual side of one’s psyche. Mr. Ilsmuth informed Vincent that his father had kept all his works within arm’s reach but never looked at them, fearing that they would reach out of the shadows and engulf him into some imaginary gaping maw. As such he entertained Vincent’s request to temporarily relocate Aldous’s paintings (ones which were given to Mr. Ilsmuth before the dementia, gifted with handwritten notes so as not to dispute ownership), to the peripheries of the studio, away from any line of sight, so that all Vincent could see were corners of the canvases, little spears of color, like the legs of a crushed witch. He could feel the pull of these haunted paintings as if they ambered sorrow, petrified the feeling of losing one’s sanity throughout the course of your life, having it all come tumbling down just as your twin sons start acknowledging you as “father”.

Vincent spent the next four days eating his poetry and drinking his grain alcohol. Mr. Ilsmuth had given him some news articles written about Aldous at the height of his career and supplemented any inquiries with personal anecdotes. Aldous did not seem a good father nor a good husband, but he was a tortured soul, and product of his environment. He had experienced the horrors of war, had witnessed firsthand the power of a bullet into a cranium, specifically those of his brothers, of how difficult it was to keep quiet in the shade of the alley when the very same brick building is splattered with brain goo. He had seen the smothering of an infant, his little sister, when her cries of hunger threatened to upend four generations of hiding Ilsmuth’s in the basement underneath Gestapo boots. He had lived in terrible poverty, sought solace in whatever art supplies he could steal out of the garbage cans of families whose children have grown out of such a hobby.

With every minute Vincent felt closer to the amorphous energy that Aldous Ilsmuth had conjured. He felt as if summoning a ghost, or haunted by one. He had gotten rid of his cellphone because Aldous Ilsmuth had never had one, nor did he trust them, and now alone with his thoughts and his paint Vincent had adopted a secondary voice in his head asking with each tremor of a muscle movement: *had Aldous suffered enough to feel free to pick up a brush, does he deserve to?* The hunger pangs trembled into his stomach and Vincent consumed more poetry.

Later that evening he discovered that Aldous had taken a box cutter to his left pinky, hoping to evoke a symbolic anti-synchronicity in his art. This represents in the subtle imbalance of his compositions, some linework leaning a little lopsided, although only to the trained eye. This validates why Vincent sometimes felt a psychically disoriented looking at the pictures, as if looking at an illusion that kept revealing and shuttering itself. So now Vincent sat upon his island of broken glass and sipped the grain alcohol, his mind numb and fuzzy, set up on a high shelf to look down at Vincent as he fumbled in the dark for the box cutter with the handle of paint scabbed paintbrush in his mouth. With snowflakes of notepapers dotting his lips like spittle, Vincent bit on the paintbrush and pushed on the box cutter, his pinky bone resisting the blunt weight, forcing Vincent to lean and push his whole body through the cartilage and nerves, the bones and marrow. The sudden lack of resistance was exhilarating, and Vincent went to sawing through the bottom fragments of his collective tissue, just above the knuckle, before the pain could blossom. It felt like cutting through a deflated balloon. It was amazing how, underneath the trauma and pain, his hand indeed felt lighter. With a hot plate ready, Vincent stamped his exposed knuckle onto the sizzling surface, pluming dumplings of burning meat, hair, and flesh. To think that Aldous had gone these lengths in the tiny studio where he was squatting, his body turned skeletal, his mind unravelling, was enough to make Vincent bare the pain, as if championed by the great artist. The paintings which come from this era of Aldous’s life express the pain of smoking in the room of your own burnt flesh, your pinky a symbolic offering to the muses who now require blood and sacrifice, tokens of self-destruction.

Vincent groaned and hobbled through the candle lit studio. He had covered the beautiful vista outside his window with black tarp, because Aldous had always lived underground, like a mole person, because this was the only places he could afford when making his paintings. He got to work repainting the piece, his left hand now a bloodied mess, pooling onto his knee and then staining tarp, his blood another sun splatter amongst the rest.

Mr. Ilsmuth came to visit him. He stopped coming into the studio and instead stayed in the threshold, the ray of light from the hallway shining into the room and burning Vincent’s eyes. His large and uncomfortable frame lingered underneath the jambs, his face obscured by the shadow of the studio. He stepped aside and several men entered with heavy boots, crunching the broken glass, careful not to gag on the smell of burnt flesh. They take the original picture and Vincent’s recreation, bringing it out into the hall. Mr. Ilsmuth closed the door, leaving Vincent in his dark nest, leaving him to wait. These special moments felt earned. He is surrounded by the relics of Aldous’s psyche, but those are totems to protect him from his nemesis, his greatest challenge. He felt free without the twin paintings in the studio, that these moments of lingering on the precipice of Mr. Ilsmuth’s opinion were the reasons he fought for. Vincent wondered why he cared so much for Mr. Ilsmuth’s opinions, about whether Vincent had *it* or not. Vincent had disappointed a great many people in his life and counting Mr. Ilsmuth amongst this number was of no qualm, but no one had ever been disappointed by his ability to replicate masterpieces, which itself is a skill and a talent of artistry. But Vincent needed to be the best at this, needed to know that he had *it*, if not for creating his own art, then for recreating others. He had thwarted his parent’s hopes of surgical agency, squashed his own dreams to master his craft and headline galleries, destroyed any circulation he might have had in the underground art world. All Vincent had to show for all his struggles was his ability to duplicate. That his carousel life of forever tumbling disappointments can be dispelled by his own craft, one which was uniquely his, one which validated his existence, made his journey worth it.

Mr. Ilsmuth’s opinion felt like someone holding him at the nape of his neck, forcing him to look into a cracked mirror. Vincent recognized that Mr. Ilsmuth’s opinion was a conduit, that Vincent needed to know he had *it* for himself.

When Mr. Ilsmuth returned Vincent found that he had not been breathing. He watched in silence as the butlers brought in the painting again, this time with masks over their mouths to shield themselves from the stink fumigating in the studio like some horrible beast. Vincent stared at Mr. Ilsmuth in his rectangle of light, which seemed so distant now, so otherworldly, as if reality outside of this studio was a figment of imagination. Maybe this is how Aldous learned his craft, maybe this feeling is what shattered his psyche and taped it back together.

“So?” Vincent asked.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I need to do this Mr. Ilsmuth…Jacob.”

“You’re torturing yourself in here. This has gone too far.”

“Does the painting have it or not? Can you tell the difference?”

Mr. Ilsmuth sighed. “It does.”

Vincent shifted his weight, the glass jetting into the heels of his feet, his skin spongy with blood and lacerations like a sponge. He pointed with the bandaged hand and Mr. Ilsmuth looked pained to resist the urge to wince. Vincent did not care. “I know you’re lying. I know it’s not the same. You know it’s not the same. You’re just telling me what I want to hear.”

“I am,” Mr. Ilsmuth relented. “You’re even beginning to sound like my father.”

“That’s a good thing,” Vincent said, smiling, his face gaunt in the darkness, feeling like a melted candle, “that means I’m getting to perfection.”

“You’re trying to suffer in four days what a man had suffered in a lifetime. It’s impossible and masochistic.”

“It’s the journey, Mr. Ilsmuth,” he picked up a pair of pliers from the toolbox.

“Not this way,” he said, “I’ve bought your plane ticket back to New York City.”

“No!” Vincent found himself screeching, his body turned skeletal and ghoulish. He felt like the shadows of his den were akin to a womb, his back sticking to the walls like a hot leather seat in summer. “I must stay. I need to discover that I have *it*, that the journey was worth it.”

Vincent looked through old photographs and discovered that Aldous had been a P.O.W. during the Korean War. They had lined up the others in his platoon and fired in a row, splattering the brick wall with a Pollack’s painting of brain matter. The enemy ran out of bullets like a conveyer belt runs out of battery, and instead of killing Aldous they had taken to amusing themselves throughout the night by embedding cigarette craters into his flesh (which Vincent had begun dotting himself with, the smoke trails vaporing from his burnt flesh like kelp before disappearing into the ether of the nest). Before being rescued they attempted to extricate his front tooth with a pair of pliers but was unable to complete the task, leaving Aldous disoriented in the sunlight with a front tooth half plied like a tombstone dug up and then stopped halfway. Before getting on the plane to safety Aldous took the pliers himself and completed the task, pulling at the tooth like a hang nail, spurting fountains of gummed blood through a whistling chamber.

“I’m getting closer,” Vincent said, taking pliers and pulling at his own tooth, his eyes connected with Mr. Ilsmuth and his square of light, holding back the rest of the world so that Vincent could replicate Aldous’s journey in its purity.

Mr. Ilsmuth hopped back in disgust, raising his arms as if Vincent still had enough strength to leap and run. “Mr. Tarrot – Vincent – cease this nonsense.”

“You don’t understand,” Vincent said, holding his bloodied tooth like the bounty of a diver’s pearl. “I *need* this.”

The pearl glimmered atop the bandages, and in his ghoulish bat eyes Vincent saw the blood trail down the cartography of his mutilated hand, the fresh blood seeping into the gauze and creating a splatter of pink, trailing down space where his pinky once was. His neck had a bib of irony tasting coagulate, cascading down his lips and over his pale skin, falling like rain over a statue to his glass impressed feet, his mangled toes, his spongy flesh. He smiled a toothless smile, a spittle of wadded up poetry in the corners of his mouth like the froth of a salmon.

He returned his gaze to Mr. Ilsmuth, who now was visibly uncomfortable with Vincent’s presence, his stature nudged in the threshold with the daylight at his back, a corner of orange Los Angeles sunrise a fishing line to the normal parts of his life, not the paint splattered goblin lurking in the darkness, tucked deep within his estate.

Vincent ‘s wormy lips curled into a satisfied smile. “Jacob, is the color of the ox-blood square perhaps…human blood?”

Mr. Ilsmuth’s face remained as stony as when they first met, but Vincent could see a small escape of emotion from the hardened exterior. A poker face revealed.

“No,” Mr. Ilsmuth tried to recover, but it was already too late.

Instead, he shut the door and Vincent heard a lock from the other side. Vincent wondered why Mr. Ilsmuth had not tried to expel him from the estate. He had the man-power to forcibly remove him and the wealth to justify it to the court. Vincent’s threats of suicide via whittled paint brush, or his empty missives of burning the house down with all its inferior art, were only to show him how dedicated he was to the job, how passionate he was to be subsisting on art, just like Aldous. Vincent suspected that the sorrow he was experiencing was like a marinade for the art. Both he and Mr. Ilsmuth knew the result would be perfect, and Vincent could come home from this chrysalis with L.A. in his rear-view mirror like a dream. Maybe this was a part of the plan, the final piece of the puzzle that Mr. Ilsmuth was withholding until the right time. It would stand to reason that, being a businessman, Mr. Ilsmuth was only being tactical, that the past four days were a ruse, a string laden path down the labyrinth of artistic genius, where the minotaur was not the painting, but the journey itself.

Vincent tongued the empty spot in his mouth, tasting the paint, and started to ascend.

*Afterward* –

The police arrived at Mr. Ilsmuth’s estate the day before his brother was due to arrive back in Los Angeles. They flashed the warrant like a talisman, barging in like an army of windbreaker wearing ants. The staff of the Ilsmuth estate dived into a flurry, attempting to tidy up the mansion, to hide the paintings and the painter shaving pieces off himself and refusing to leave the self-constructed prison. Jacob waived them away, invited the police into the estate with open arms; he was the one who had called them. This was earlier this morning, when Mr. Tarrot ceased trying to vie for Jacob’s opinion and even stopped banging at the door, claiming it to be locked from the outside. No food had entered the studio and the windows had been barred from the inside with stapled canvases and upturned furniture. A true nest. Jacob knew that with every hour there was less body mass on the man, his skeletal structure peeking like a vacuum sealed package, void of blood. His vile brother was due to arrive tomorrow; Jacob needed the painting. He had paid for it, paid for more than necessary.

Jacob led the platoon through his marbled halls, leading to the barred door in which the creature lurked, seething and mixing biomass, gurgling through exposed orifices. The police made to bust open the door with force and after pounding through the upturned beds and desks blocking the threshold Jacob got the inclination that perhaps Mr. Tarrot had died several days ago, and his rotting corpse sweltering and fusing to the canvases, to the paint splattered tarps. Jacob watched several officers move into the dark cavern, ignoring the rotting, noxious fumes, their feet crunching against mine fields of broken glasse. A young officer stepped out of the room, blinking in the day broken light, and proceeded to vomit in a Birds of Paradise.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ilsmuth,” he said, wiping a pebble of slop from his mouth with the back of a gloved wrist.

“Is he dead?” Jacob asked, wondering if the decaying molecules perspiring off a body would taint the paintings.

When the young officer did not answer Jacob decided to venture into the cavern himself, his nice dress shoes crunching the stomped glass like snow. The room was musty and smelled of wood chippings, excrement, spit, and paint. The air had an acidic, coppery taste. Jacob stepped over fallen furniture, each foot venturing into a strange land, like an art exhibit in his house that had become so alien to develop a life of its own, which, Jacob thinks, is actually not that far off. His feet stepped on something soft and cylindrical. It was bloodied and mangled, as if pulled from the mouth of a dog. Jacob did not want to know for sure but would guess that it was a finger or a toe. Maybe an ear. He stepped over little ponds of a blood-paint mixture, the density between the two beginning to separate into little oil spills.

“Where is he?” Jacob asked when he was standing in the middle of the room surrounded by the officers.

“Try the light, Moretz,” the Captain called.

When the lights ceased to work several officers shone bright yellow crescents from their flashlights, casting strange shadows off this obliterated room. His father’s paintings shown in the flashlight, a personal podium, another life of undivided attention. Jacob was pleased that each painting appeared untarnished.

“Where is he?” Jacob asked again, his muscles pressing against the tightness of his jacket. He liked how the fabric cinched and pinched his arms and armpits. He liked being physically restrained. It anchored him. He called out, “Mr. Tarrot? Vincent?”

A croaking, whistling voice answered back: “Did I do it?”

The flashlights rounded on the voice, revealing a tiny doll cloaked in tattered clothes, dotted with sunspots of urine and feces, blood and paint. Wads of gummed poetry fell into the cavern of his stomach like little cotton balls. His eyes had receded into his skull, which had become threadbare in patches. One of the eyes was swollen and red and crusted with infection. The ghoul jangled a wrist in the air, feebly holding onto a paint brush with an index finger and thumb, which are the only remaining fingers on its hands. The monster smiled with no lips and bloodied canyons of gums, void of most teeth. The creature adjusted to the light and began to rise, its knees buckling like a newborn fawn, its core threatening to fold like a house of cards. With its left hand a nub to the wrist and its remaining two fingers, the ghoul opened its arms like a prophet waiting to be worshipped. The man had become a wraith, skin flapping in the wind, mutilated like a sycophant to some unnamable god. Before it was two totems, one which was born from Jacob’s father’s hands, the other which was not.

“Did I did it?’ The creature asked again. The police gingerly stepped over the fallen paint cans and smashed canvases. They hooked the ghoul’s wrists behind his back and led him over the mine field, his feet leaving a slug trail of blood in its wake. It called again, “Did I do it? Did I do it? Did I suffer enough?”

One of the butlers found Jacob stuck in between the two paintings, as if petrified by the sheer equalitarian pull of them. “Your brother is due to return tomorrow. We need to replace the original. Which one is it?”

Jacob drew in a breath. He felt a pain deep within his psyche, although he could not exactly explain why. “Which one do you think?”

“I don’t know sir. They both look very similar.”

“Yes. But one of them has *it*.”