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There’s a room in the National Gallery called the ‘Overflow Room’. You walk into the Main Gallery, up the steps, past the pink marble pillars and underneath those grand old murals. Keep going through the first gallery you see. King Charles is in there, on a horse. The picture was painted by Anthony van Dyck when Anthony van Dyck was the most famous artist in the country, because he kept on finding ways to make King Charles look taller.

In the next room, ignore the landscapes and those vast, cold seascapes; glide past the men and women skating on the Thames. Look instead at the elongated aristocrat leaning on a stick, floating in a mist of grey. He’s pointing out of the picture.

Follow the direction the aristocrat points you in, and you’ll see a small spiral staircase dissolve into the floor in the corner of the room. It’s the first thing you will have walked by so far that’s the right scale for a human being—everything else in this Gallery is built for giants. That’s what makes the staircase so hard to see. Go downstairs.

Turn right.

People don’t come down here often. If you see anyone, they might ask you what you’re doing.

Push the door.

This is the Overflow Room, where paintings go when they’re not being used.

Step inside.

That’s the official line, anyway. But we all know that the paintings from the National Gallery collection go into storage when they’re not being looked at. They are packaged up with white gloves and layers of plastic; they are sealed with air at the correct temperature; they are rested like fairytale princesses who have been sent to sleep.

But the paintings in the Overflow Room are stored with all the contempt for the ugly sisters and wicked stepmothers rolled into one. Stacked against chipboard, twelfth-century tempura rests on eighteenth-century bitumen, leans on 1960s reinforced glass. Like the ugly sisters and the wicked stepmothers, these paintings are being punished because they’re not what they seem.

They were bought as showpieces by great masters, but later they were caught out as something else. Here are the pictures that have been downgraded from Rembrandt to ‘the Dutch School’; from Reynolds to ‘a painter in the grand style’; from Picasso to ‘a follower of Cubism’. They were fussed over by eager connoisseurs and bureaucrats with large cheque books; now they turn their painted faces to the wall to spare the Gallery’s blushes. The punishment for the ugly sisters and the wicked stepmothers is to be forgotten.

‘Let’s never look at them again’, said the connoisseurs, on their way to Sotheby’s.

Rub your hands along the gilt frames. Push your fingers into those nooks and crannies that cast such unusual

shadows on the linoleum flooring. Some of them are thick with dust, thick dust—black and matted together like years of neglect. When you touch them you send clouds of dirty resentment into the air: a puff of bitterness from the not-Caravaggio, a wheeze of despair from the never-was-Cezanne. Watch the dust settle—but don’t let it settle on you, or the people upstairs will be able to tell you’ve been looking.

The buxom servant girl that wasn’t painted by Vermeer keeps pouring ale into a pewter tankard; the round-faced Madonna—un-touched by Titian—gazes beatifically from behind her lapis lazuli shawl; the racehorse, that George Stubbs never saw, begins to crack behind his thick glaze.

Not all of the pictures wait for their grimy coffins. Some still shimmer with the adoration of school children, tourists, art students, art lovers, people on days out, people on dates, people looking for something beautiful—people who go to the National Gallery. Some still shine with the freedom of the Galleries upstairs; they remember the light and the space up there. They remember the army of cleaners who wiped them with warm, soapy water, the private functions and the champagne, the security guards’ idle banter. Some of the pictures still hold their breath for purified air, and some of the pictures still hold their pose for attention.

That’s because pictures brighten with interest. The servant girl’s milky white skin freshened with each comment, the horse’s mane thickened with each visitor. Perhaps, if you were to carry on looking, you could make them fresher and thicker too.

Every now and again—maybe it’s once a month, maybe it’s once a decade (time doesn’t matter much down here)—one of the paintings gets taken away. The servant girl straightens her shoulders and waits to be noticed. The horse tenses its muscles and waits to be picked. The flaking Madonnas and cracked landscapes and fading still lifes hold their hundred-year old breath and hope they’ll be the ones released today. But today it’s a small bible scene painted onto copper that the bureaucrats thought was by Elsheimer, once, before they realised their mistake and plucked it off the wall. Now it’s going to be photographed for a Christmas card or a fridge magnet, or an eraser or maybe a bookmark. One of the new bureaucrats has remembered it and brought it back to life.

The un-Vermeer servant girl sighs into her ale and watches it tumble into the pewter tankard. Still not her, not today. She’s still not up there, with the Sleeping Beauties who got their happy ending. The un-Vermeer servant girl stays in the Overflow Room with her back to a landscape that isn’t by Turner and waits as her skin turns dull and her shawl turns black, and the tankard turns grey and the ale goes flat. She waits to be noticed until she won’t be seen again, because a picture that isn’t by Brueghel has eclipsed her face. In front of her, dancing peasants stretch their smiles and cup their beers, in anticipation of the day when they’ll be seen and rescued.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Mary Paterson.*