

Portrait in Flesh

By Malaya Barroso, age 16, Coquitlam

Bristles quaking in anticipation. Hand quivering in focus. Canvases precisely scattered around the secluded studio. Maven drenches his grimy paintbrush, smearing each hair in thick dripping crimson. His brush searches to find varied shades of his subject. She sits paralyzed, her ivory bones peeking out from where her hands are severed.

Maven steeps the brush into the oozing **ichor** of her palms. They're poised for a bloody high five. Replicating the agony she underwent while he hacked away at her in a few precise strokes, he captures every crease, callous, and chronicle her knuckles have encountered. He traces with her hands' secretion, deep ruby red as the cabernet sauvignon he slurps.

The subject's unblinking eyes stare up, up, up at portraits of mortals whose souls have been captured like hers. Every color, age, and reality of a person has been painfully curated by Maven. Stroking fluids that flowed through them onto a canvas of stretched and resewn skin. He examines bodies. He extracts essence. He expels **spectral** selves to deck the halls of his sinister exhibit.

The *thunk-tap* of shoes striking cedar flooring echoes from the exhibit below. Curious skepticism is soon drowned out by gasps, gapes and gawks. The portraits are mildly intriguing. An old gaffer's eye impaled by the smoking cigar in his hand. A teen's skeleton contorted into a pretzel. A baby's cry suffocated by a bottle shoved down her throat.

Enthralled, the guests never realize the corridors they creep through are narrowing as quickly as their **keen** interest. Oblivious to the cedar scent disguising the descent to doom, clueless until—*BAM!* The door slams shut behind them, oil lanterns surrendering their blaze, the warmth that once occupied the corridor bolting away. The subjects cluster towards the artist's secluded studio.

They discover where Maven's newest work is displayed. The latest addition: a woman's appalling expression at the sight of her dangling arms bleeding out, her hands absent at the scene.

A sign outside the door to Maven's studio reads, "Get a private sneak peek of the exhibit's next piece in progress. No flash photography. No payment necessary. Bare your soul."

Maven waits behind the door, his last subject stashed away, his wineglass set aside, red liquid dribbling down his chin. The opening chords of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor begin playing from a decaying record player in the corner of the cramped studio. The uneasy melody masks Maven trading brush for blade.

He sharpens it with tranquil viciousness.

His mind excites at the thought of his next piece.

The suspense fuels his improvisation.

The door creaking open. The blade quaking in anticipation. Hand quivering in focus. The new subject proceeding forward cautiously. A sniff of their scent is enough for Maven to envision their portrait

fleshed out.