

WORTH

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Characters:

The Guard: Male, from Croatia, mid-30s-40s

The Curator: Female, any ethnicity, stylish and knowledgeable, 40 +

The Painter: Female, any ethnicity, American, mid-20 - 30s

A neutral space, with a beautiful floor - the kind you might see in the modern wing of a museum or high-end gallery. The background is a large black screen or wall on which are projected many small white dots, sort of like stars in the night sky or flakes of snow on black velvet. This is *the painting*.

The characters begin in their respective environments: The Guard standing at his post, The Curator at her desk in the museum and the Artist on a high stool giving a talk about her work.

CURATOR

Skeptics? There were always these skeptics. I think the skeptics, at least over the past five years or so, were proven right - there are artists who are making abstract paintings that are perfect for the way they are consumed: they make a lot of them - there's a green one and a blue one and a pink one - and you can collect them all like toys in a Cracker Jack box. That's what they're all about. The sameness, the repetition, is extremely important, because you want a piece that's instantly recognizable as being from one of these painters. But she - this - is not one of those.

GUARD

Black paint. White Dots. No frame. Square. I've counted. The dots. I think there are 64. Sometimes I get 65. 64 or 65 white dots on a black background. How long does this take? An afternoon? Maybe longer. I guess the black must dry first. Before you apply the dots. A couple of days. Max. It's worth a million dollars. ONE. MILLION. Black with white dots.

The Guard starts counting the dots.

GUARD

One, two, three, four, five...

The Guard continues to count  
silently.

PAINTER

The sky? Sure. The sea? If you like. Death. Mmmmm...maybe?  
When I paint an abstract picture, I don't ever know in  
advance what it is meant to look like OR what I am aiming at  
and how I am getting there. Painting for me is -  
consequently - an almost blind, desperate effort. When I  
paint I'm like a person abandoned, helpless, in totally  
incomprehensible surroundings -

GUARD

23, 24, 25, 26 -

PAINTER

-it's like I possess a set of tools, materials and abilities  
and have the urgent desire to create something useful (which  
is not allowed to be a house or a chair or anything else  
that has a name). Therefore, I hack away with the vague hope  
that by working in a proper, professional way I will  
ultimately turn out something meaningful and of value.

GUARD

62, 63, SIXTY.FOUR.64 white dots. One million dollars. (beat)  
I make 12 dollars and 35 cents an hour.

CURATOR

There's this group of artists—mostly from the United States,  
Germany, and the U.K.—who, it seems to me, just said, "This  
isn't so hard." When, actually, it really is hard. To make a  
good abstract painting is really, really, really hard.  
What's not hard is to make an object that looks okay and is  
salable. That's not hard at all!

The Curator laughs.

GUARD

I think it's the sky. The kind of sky you see when there's  
no other light. The sky out in the countryside or in Zagreb  
during the war. No street lights, no cafes open, no people  
in the square. Except scurrying from one building to the  
next, like frightened mice. Carrying cigarettes or slivovitz

or sausages back to their hole. (beat)12 dollars and 35 cents. To stand and count the stars.

The Guard laughs.

PAINTER

And yeah, I like it when I can sell one. Who doesn't like money? And prestige. If a painting never hangs in a gallery or museum is it still a painting? (she waits)Yes, of course!...AND it may even still be a good painting. But in the meantime, the painter might starve. Or have to give up painting. Or, you know, drink a lot of absinthe and chop off an ear.

The Painter laughs.

CURATOR

If there's any way that a viewer can discern investment—I don't mean money, but *investment*—that's always a good thing. It could be time, and a lot of people think time is important. But I believe in belief. I believe that if people think they're doing something for a purpose, then it's worth looking at. Whether I like it or not, someone will like it at some point.

GUARD

So beautiful. A night like that. Outside, on your back, counting the stars.

There is the very light sound of  
the outside at night. Insects,  
breeze, leaves rustling in the  
trees.

PAINTER

This painting, Study number 05, is one of a series. A series of events. That happened to me. Over many years. Painting was a salvation of sorts. A purging. And eventually a healing. Or *will* be. This piece is "0-five", as in two thousand and five. The year. One of the years. When I was 13.

CURATOR

There aren't that many of them, even if I'm making them sound like a huge group. But there are some of these younger artists who say, "I can make money as an artist. This is my profession. I can hire people, and I can go in at 9 o'clock and punch the time clock and make 12 of them, and come out, and go home." That attitude, that way of looking at art, is

mistaken. It is wrong.

The dots become slightly more  
alive, like a real night sky. The  
sound gets a little more present.

GUARD

Papa used to take us camping, up in the country - me, and my little brother. This was before the war. Before my brother went off to "protect the homeland". Papa would tell us stories about the gypsies, and ghosts and wolves that lived up in the hills, and then be surprised when we were too afraid to go to sleep! So he'd tell us to count the stars. We'd fall asleep like that - under a blanket with Papa between us - counting the stars.

The Guard lays down on the floor  
and looks up at the sky.

One, two, three, four, five -

The Guard keeps counting silently.

PAINTER

This situation was wrong. Very wrong. Every time it would happen I would close my eyes really tightly. In the blackness behind your eyes there are white specs of light. I would focus on them and leave my body and float up into the sky.

GUARD

14, 15, 16, 17-

He counts silently.

PAINTER

...keep looking at the light not the dark.

GUARD

21, 22, 23, 24, 25-

The Guard keeps counting quietly.

CURATOR

This has been my belief system since before I began: I want be with the believers. I invest in the people who are doing it for real. I believe, in my heart, that the ones that are bogus probably won't be on the walls of the museum. They

might be on the walls of people's houses, but not the museum.

GUARD

45, 46, 47, 48-

The outdoor sounds get louder, and the Guard rises and moves towards the painting.

PAINTER

But no matter what you do while it's happening, afterwards, there is still a hole - an emptiness. Where you used to be. You have no belief. Nothing feels real. You are ripped open but there is nothing inside.

CURATOR

Belief. It's all you can hang onto. Your gut knowledge that this is all for a reason.

GUARD

55, 56, 57-

The outside sounds start morphing into something darker.

PAINTER

It's amazing that the painting has struck such a chord with so many people. It's very gratifying to see it hanging there in the museum for the world to see. And I suddenly have commissions, interviews - so many people excited about the work. My work. And, of course, the money from the museum has helped with lots of things in my life. Material things, yes, but more. It has made me feel like my work has worth. That... I am here for a reason.

The outdoor sounds get taken over by the abstracted sounds of war - bombs, sirens, gunfire.

GUARD

61, 62, 63, 64.

The Guard removes the key ring from his belt. He carefully selects a single key and hold it between his index finger and thumb. He raises his arm and slowly and deliberately slices through the canvas of the

painting with the key. There is a  
huge ripping sound and then  
silence. The screen is black.

GUARD

I like to think that is what he saw. The stars. As he lay in  
the field at the end of his life. My brother. Drifting off  
as the life drained from him. Beautiful. At peace.

PAINTER

Peace.

End of play.