

## *Artificial*

by Kellan MacKenzie

*“Are you sure you’re awake?”*

I don’t answer. Of course I’m not sure. What even defines “awake”? Frankly, I don’t quite care whether this is real or not, as long as I don’t have to think for a while.

The figure who asked the question doesn’t push any further, just offers a tour if I want to be shown around, which I do. They wear an oversized brown coat, colourful patches on the elbows. Their face is indistinguishable, shrouded in what appears to be fog. As for their voice, I’m not sure I ever heard it. It sounds like the voice in my head.

I don’t know where I am, but that’s typical; I get lost a lot these days. We’re on a dirt road that traverses a picturesque field, all yellow corn and trampled wheat. Behind me is a small house. Perhaps it’s mine? A garden and a mushroom roof make it charming, despite the size. In front of me is a city I have seen before, a city I built myself from the ground up, though it seems less familiar now. My thoughts are cloudy and don’t make sense, but I don’t mind.

Patches guides me down the dusty road, then through the narrow city streets. We don’t talk, but they occasionally gesture towards a piece of graffiti or art, all depicting the same familiar green eyes through different media. There are fish as well, swimming through the sky, but I think that must be normal around here.

I have a strange sense of dissociation, and suddenly I am watching myself from the rooftops as I walk the streets, and then I am behind my own eyes again. I’m not walking anymore, but my body keeps moving.

The lack of people is unsettling, and I point out as much to Patches. They nod in agreement. Moments later we pass a large group of teenagers playing a game, and I realize that there have been people on the streets all along, dancing and walking from store to store.

We turn down an alley and head towards a forest. There are light bulbs suspended from nothing that guide our way. I cannot tell if it’s day or night or something else altogether. Large trunks stretch up forever, and occasionally there is a statue or an abandoned gas station between the trees. To my left I see an astronaut bounding through the snow, but then I blink and it’s just a pond with stars splattered at the bottom. I am not wearing shoes, and the moss beneath my feet is warm and comforting.

We come to a clearing and Patches sits down with the guitar they weren’t carrying seconds before. They gesture towards an easel placed on the grass.

*Paint, they are saying, like you always have.*

So I do.

I’m not sure how long we spend like that, Patches’ melody guiding my hands as I create the thing I am running from. It is the only way I can ground myself in whatever reality this is; I need a piece of home.

The music has stopped without me noticing, and Patches is behind me, a non-existent hand on my shoulder. My cheeks are wet as I stare at my painting, a galaxy hidden within the pupil of a single green eye. I am dangerously close to awareness. I don’t want to be here anymore.

And so I am not. Patches and I stare at the entrance to an archaic castle. Our castle. Stone and moss walls, large windows that face the sun, no matter what time it is. Patches asks me if I remember building it, but I am no longer sure what I remember. We explore the castle's ancient walls and memories left to age behind locked doors. I see my books and empty mugs in the library, exactly where I left them, the fire still crackling, warm and welcoming. I think everything is all right.

Then I look at the walls. Thousands of eyes in charcoal, pastel, and acrylic cover every surface, some framed, some hastily taped, some sitting in piles leaning against the baseboards. I remember every time I have ever drawn that eye. Dozens of different attempts to escape my memories, and there is the proof of my thousand failures.

My thousand and one failures. Patches hangs my latest galaxy eye on the wall. They do that every time. The eyes follow me every time.

“You look just like him,” I say.

Patches turns to me, and I can see green eyes through the fog mask.

*Please stop*, he pleads with me. *I wouldn't have wanted this.*

But Patches is not him, I realize. Patches is me.

The walls shatter and the world falls apart around me; I am left in total nothingness, staring at Patches. Staring at myself, tears not material enough to fall. It happens every time.

*You need to face real life*, I whisper to myself. *Don't do this.*

I do it anyway; it's time to try again.

*I open my eyes peacefully. With the sunlight pouring through the window, the memory of my dream is already retreating. Loud knocking at my door gets me up, and I open it to a welcome face. I squint up at him.*

“You're not dead.” *I sigh, relieved.*

*He only smiles; laughter crinkles his green eyes as he grabs my arm, inviting me to sit near the lake and paint with him while we drink our morning tea. I accept and grab my coat with the patches on the elbows. There is a crumpled piece of paper in the pocket, which I toss to the ground.*

*I know this isn't real, but I am content to never face reality.*

*The paper that reads “Are you sure you're awake?” falls to the ground and disappears.*

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