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*The Secret Exhibition*

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Mikey got there early. The streets and pavements were deserted, so he was able to ride fast, wear headphones and not think about unexpected obstructions. He'd wanted to get up and out before everything started this morning, that whirl of voices and preparation which would soon engulf the flat. Leonard, his little brother, slept on as Mikey rose, stumbled to wash his bleary face and force himself to eat some cereal, write a note telling his mother he'd be back in time for dinner. His brother had lain awake for hours last night, thoughts full of what the next day would bring, Leonard's body shifting in his bed on the other side of their room. Mikey listened to his brother move restlessly through the small hours, unable to fall into unconsciousness himself, kept alert by a different set of expectations pounding through his brain.

The morning drizzle was subsiding now so Mikey pulled down the hood of his top, better to see the approach of his friends. Mikey was unfamiliar with this part of London, the wide roads and sense of prosperity, those detached houses behind immaculate rows of trees that stretched back along both sides of this thoroughfare. The first time they came here it was simple investigation, the boys too focussed on evading the suspicious glances of transport workers to look beyond the station. Today Mikey had a chance to understand this place, taking in that car park adjoining the tube, those hedges obscuring nearby driveways. This suburb was less than two miles from the shabbiness and litter of his estate, yet in some ways it was a whole different world.

Mikey's eyes settled on a festive display embellishing one of the houses, a portly Santa flashing red and white on his sleigh. He stared at it until Dwayne arrived, his friend skidding to a stop in front of Mikey, a display of daredevilry to draw his attention. Dwayne's mud-speckled bike slid to the ground as he jumped off, the pair greeting each other with the words and hand gestures they always used.

Of them all, Dwayne lived closest to this meeting point, claimed it had taken him ten minutes to ride here today, a boast Mikey treated with the disdain it deserved. Instead of responding to the patter, Mikey checked the time, saw that Jamal was late as Dwayne launched into a description of his morning. How he'd woken half an hour ago to the sound of *his moms* yelling she was off to church, and it had taken superhuman speed to get here by the agreed hour. Mikey kept his own counsel, watched that Santa flash in the

distance, let Dwayne's babble overwhelm his growing concern. Because if Jamal didn't make it here, everything was lost.

Then he was with them, must have arrived in silence, Dwayne taken by surprise and alleging, not for the first time, that Jamal was part ninja. In response Jamal just smiled, swung the old rucksack onto his back and set off, Mikey following him to the place where they would leave their bikes, a fence bordering some kind of posh school. At least it looked exclusive to Mikey, all those buildings and facilities, gates locked tight over this holiday period.

They chained up their bikes, strutting back down the driveway to cross the road, Dwayne talking of his plans all the way, asking Jamal what he was going to do and receiving a vague grunt in reply. The trio closed in on the tube, the nearest station to offer access located on the uppermost fork of that black line running across the city, like a worm through a swordfish. The other stops they'd considered either underground and out of bounds, or barricaded with impassable shutters today, so this had to be the one.

This station allowed the teenagers to vault the ticket barriers, Dwayne whooping as he did so, then cross a bridge to the open platform. Mikey found himself checking both ways, reminding himself there would be no trains today. Then he followed the others, sat on the platform's edge, before allowing himself to drop a few feet onto the tracks.

Jamal was already striding off, due south down the line, Dwayne in his wake. Mikey overrode his inclination to avoid the metal rails, those bars that were electrified any other morning, and hurried to catch up. He eventually settled on a steady course between the tracks while Dwayne zigzagged across, balancing on one of the rails briefly, elated and bursting with adrenalin, a joy at finding himself in unexplored territory.

As Jamal led the way, Mikey felt his nerves ease, relaxing into the steady progress they were making, somewhere between a trudge and a march. The trio had their hoods up against the cold and walked with heads angled downwards, observing the pace set by Jamal, but careful to watch out for rocks or discarded cans, anything that might cause a loss of footing. After ten minutes they came to the next station which was also abandoned, those vending machines and waiting rooms lonely somehow with no travellers to serve.

This was where the line went underground and Mikey regarded the darkened tunnel with some concern. He could tell that Dwayne was similarly apprehensive, not that he'd have allowed the bravado to drop. The pair of them paused to watch Jamal take a torch from his pack, flick on the beam and point it into the blackness, keeping his light fixed on the ground in front as he disappeared inside.

The others swallowed their fear and went after Jamal, just as they always did. At school Mikey and Dwayne had first become aware of the wordless boy in the year above with his braided hair and air of certainty. Jamal inspired awe in many of the younger boys, seemed to have a silent comprehension of the whole world and how it worked, an understanding that always eluded Mikey. Yet he hardly ever spoke, to the extent that some of Jamal's teachers wondered if there was something wrong, although Mikey came to understand this silence was a form of strength. It gave Jamal power over the boys who couldn't hold back, peers talking nineteen to the dozen just to fill the space, kids incapable of noiselessness, verbalising all their thoughts and giving themselves away.

The rumours had flown around their comprehensive for a while, as more of those unmistakable tags appeared across the neighbourhood in unlikely areas, walls and structures that required serious courage and no little planning to deface. No one dared broach the subject directly to Jamal, not until Dwayne came along with his customary ballsiness and lack of tact. As Mikey stood there, watching at the school gates, Jamal regarded Dwayne and his assertions with suspicion, then something close to amusement. Mikey wondered if Jamal sensed something in the pair of them that day, a potential that had gone unrecognised by families and teachers, or perhaps he'd simply been in the mood to mentor someone. Jamal was an only child and led a solitary existence in the main, those barricades he put up to protect himself had the effect of keeping everyone else out, including those who might have added something to his life.

Whatever his motives, Dwayne and Mikey soon found themselves under Jamal's wing, accompanying him on night sorties and intrepid daylight raids, learning the tricks and techniques, the equipment that allowed a young man to force his vision onto the landscape. Thanks to this older boy, Mikey found himself at the centre of the world for the first time, every day filled with purpose, a time when his skill and pride in their work blossomed. He knew from Dwayne's non-stop talk, all that rapping about who'd

mentioned their last piece, and what was going up next time, that his friend felt the same way.

For the best part of an hour the trio kept up a steady pace down the tunnel, the dark relieved only when they passed through three more stations, gleaming outposts amid the gloom. At one point Mikey heard a squealing noise and Dwayne called up, asking Jamal about the sound and getting one word in response: *MICE*. The prospect made Dwayne hop about, a dance of fear for those unseen rodents by his trainers, an image that would always come to mind for Mikey when he thought of Dwayne in the future. Here was a sixteen year old boy who claimed nothing frightened him, would talk of getting caught between warring gangs, or that time he'd handled his brother's gun. Yet here he was, yelping with terror because of a few mice.

By the time Dwayne regained his composure their destination was in sight, a glowing light in the distance Jamal quickened his pace to reach. This was the major interchange to the north of this line, a station serving that part of the city synonymous with alternative culture. There were shops named after this place all across the world, each trying to invoke a mythology of rebellion, an idea pre-packaged in retail outlets from Eastern Europe to America. This was the place where white kids came to get inked or pierced, dressed up in outlandish fashions and found their tribes, a communion with the like-minded. Youngsters who had been outsiders all their lives immediately feel at home in this part of North London, after years as the only Goth or punk or metal head in their corner of the world. Here unconventionality was itself the convention, alienation *de rigueur* if you wanted to be accepted, where strolling down the high street in a business suit would get you odd looks, sniggers and comments from people with multicoloured hair, torn clothing, tattoos on their faces.

Usually they would have been here, the platform littered with tourists in leather and fishnets, all wondering how to reach their destinations in a variety of languages. Today the place was empty of life, those alternative types all at home, spending Christmas with the same parents who funded their trips here, subsidised the record collections and body modifications.

Dwayne placed both hands on the edge and hoisted himself onto the platform, reaching back to help Mikey up. Jamal was already standing on a bench, rucksack open at

his feet, a dozen multicoloured cans visible inside. He held the nozzle of one close to the ceiling, created a black line beside the *Way Out* sign, like a rain cloud on the white paint. Mikey sorted the cans one by one, set them down neatly while Dwayne looked round with glee, realising their talk hadn't just been an idle fantasy. They were making this happen.

The station was their domain now, to decorate as thoroughly as they could, until circumstances prevented them from continuing. As the leader and most experienced, Jamal was in charge of the bigger picture and he sprayed outlines for the others to finish, shapes and designs either side of the platform, a one-word order to Mikey or Dwayne when they stepped up to help, shade those areas *yellow* or *green* or *orange*.

The younger pair were content to act as inkers on this enormous mural, Dwayne filling the seven-foot letters with grey paint, while Mikey finished it with a red background, trying to depict a pool of blood around the initials, spray drips down by his feet, more spreading across the floor.

Jamal had envisaged this scene many times, lying in bed at night, after long days in facilities at the central London office, a job he'd found earlier this year and already grown sick of, persevering because it paid for the paint and his independence. Today had been looming in his thoughts for weeks, whenever Jamal cleaned the coffee machine or stocked the photocopier, watched those deskbound workers on many times his wage waste their hours on the internet or spend an afternoon putting up Christmas decorations. After so long in that tedious and demeaning role, struggling through his days to stockpile supplies covering them for today, Jamal wasn't about to waste this chance.

The wall at the side of the platform was complete, letters stretching from one end barrier to the next, so Jamal jumped onto the tracks and began work on the surface commuters would stare at while waiting for their trains. The others followed him down, excited to see Jamal adorn this wall with the tags Dwayne and Mikey had chosen for today, pseudonyms made up and designed by the younger pair, but which Jamal could replicate without a second thought. He gave the letters that expected shadow effect, took care to cover the advertisements for banks and whisky and crisps pasted here, moving steadily down the tracks.

They progressed quickly, Jamal's concentration total, the only audible sound a hissing as paint was expelled, Dwayne holding a can in each hand to save time. For Mikey that first rush had worn off, now he just wanted to do a thorough job, support his friends then get the hell out.

Mikey knew he had a tendency to worry too much, his mates often ribbed him about it, but that was because he had the most to lose. Dwayne was the type of kid who assumed he could get away with anything, all the way up until the policeman's hand landed on his shoulder. The thought of getting caught never entered Dwayne's mind, while for Jamal this mission was an end in itself, whatever the outcome for them personally. As long as this day went right Jamal was content to deal with any aftermath, whatever fallout came his way. Only Mikey desperately needed to get away with it, knew the hoods they wore concealed their identities, but still felt that fear down in his stomach. Someone might see footage of them on a monitor, send the authorities down to arrest these three vandals, and it wasn't heroic to have the police call your mother on Christmas Day, send a car over to collect the tearful woman.

Then there was Shirelle. Mikey had only been seeing the girl for a month or two, but there was something different about this one. Shirelle was smart and pretty and ambitious, kept talking of the potential she saw in him and was definitely going to college next year. She expected Mikey to join her, but that would all be at risk if today went wrong, a prospect Mikey hadn't allowed himself to consider until now, a moment when it had suddenly become very real.

They reached the end of the wall, Jamal finishing his design with a flourish of purple, Mikey gathering the paints together, while Dwayne sprayed his tag across the platform's metal seats. The teenagers didn't pause, they had no time to admire their achievements. Instead Jamal led them up the steps, towards that place where the quartet of station walkways met. Opposite the escalators were signs for each platform, and this was where Jamal set down his bag, beneath those LED displays that would list the trains on a regular day.

Jamal pointed up at the CCTV cameras and Dwayne understood what he had to do, directed Mikey to the device on the other side before spraying the lens near him with black paint, preventing anyone from seeing what they were about to do. Mikey pulled the

material of his hood closer together, hiding his face as best he could, defacing that camera by the down escalator with the can in his other hand.

This was risky, he knew that. Anyone checking now couldn't fail to notice this part of the system had been disabled. What Mikey didn't know was that the employee supposedly manning the control room for much of Christmas Day, that man charged with being present and ready for emergencies, wasn't even at his post. The worker on shift, a recently divorced man called Ted, had looked in on the bank of screens first thing that morning, then gone straight to the station's first aid room for a lie down. There he stayed, sleeping off last night's over-indulgence, along with several weeks of alcohol abuse only tenuously linked to the festive season, safe in the knowledge that no one would miss him, Ted could do whatever he wanted.

Jamal outlined three letters in pink then blue, a huge *JDM* stretching up and over the electronic displays, filling them with silver paint to form a tribute to those making their mark here, the first evidence of their presence people entering tomorrow would see.

They moved to another platform, then another, Jamal and Mikey focussing on the tags while Dwayne was given some slack, freestyled whatever he wanted across the walls, indulging his jungle cat obsession with a lopsided tiger, working with white paint to spray angry felines across the dark floor.

The three of them toiled for hours, a silent rebuke to those elders who said they didn't understand hard work, dismissed their generation as feckless and never amounting to anything. Dwayne heard it the most, he was the sort of kid who couldn't concentrate on schoolwork, didn't even bother showing up at the comprehensive some days. But this was different, here Dwayne became engrossed, trying to get his ideas across that great public canvas as Jamal filled their surroundings with colour, the only existing graphic he had to work around, that red and blue roundel which advised them this was Camden Town, a sign dotting the station at regular intervals.

This was real graffiti, a risky guerrilla act, conceived on a huge scale and with much at stake. Some of Mikey's anxiety lifted now, and he allowed himself to feel the euphoria of the outlaw artist, an experience so unlike that of the famous guy, that man rich people always thought of when you said the word; *graffiti*. The famous guy had never been photographed but still he appeared in the magazines, his work fetching big

money. He had crossed so far into culture and respectability that some councils even preserved his work, choosing not to paint over the designs because of the kudos they lent an area. Mikey knew Jamal didn't think much of the famous guy, his celebrity fans and prank-pulling, the way he made this art about practical jokes and hackneyed political views, creating images the well-off could internalise and admire without leaving their comfort zone. For Jamal this wasn't about some message, he was out to achieve self-expression, the loss of an everyday identity in something bigger. The only esteem they would gain for this, the only acknowledgment they wanted, was that of kids they respected, and even this recognition would have to come for their alter egos. The last thing they wanted was for anyone to know their given names. The display was the thing here, and you didn't need connections or fancy slogans for that, nothing but a couple of spray cans and your own fearlessness.

By the time they got to the fourth and final platform some of the cans were dead and they began to finish up with less enthusiasm, splurging paint half-heartedly, knowing they couldn't cover every inch and running low on inspiration, still unable to ignore that voice inside urging them not to waste this opportunity.

Mikey shook a can of yellow paint forcefully, attempting to expel enough to finish the illustration he'd been working on. That was when Dwayne came over to ask what the time was. Turned out they'd been in the station for more than five hours. Mikey's response to the lateness of the hour was the same as his friend, both of them knew they'd be in a world of trouble if they got back late.

The pair approached Jamal, stood beside one of the cabinets that contained the station's fire extinguishers working on some kind of demonic face. Jamal nodded, told them to pack the empty cans back into the rucksack and move to the platform where they'd come in.

Before leaving, Jamal paused to survey their handiwork, his first and greatest creation of the day. In the only display of sentimentality Mikey had ever seen from him, Jamal took out a disposable camera and got a few shots of their designs, jumping down to the tracks for a better view of that wall opposite.

Eventually he switched the torch on and they were back in the tunnel, relief washing over them, exultation at escaping tempered by the length of time they'd gone

without food or drink. The trio walked through the dark in silence, bellies rumbling, Mikey counting his steps to the next station, then the number of stops before they came out into the world. At the same time, back in Camden Town, Ted was struggling up off his makeshift bed, head still fuzzy from that monumental hangover. The employee grabbed his stuff, didn't bother to check the monitors, leaving the station for a solitary evening at home.

After the teenagers retrieved the bikes they went their separate ways with barely a word, tired and spent and distracted by the needs of their bodies. Each was eager to get indoors, out of the rain that had started to fall once more, the winter evening growing dark and cold.

Much to his mother's chagrin, Mikey was generally the sort of boy who picked at his food, so when she saw the healthy appetite for today's supermarket turkey and vegetables she quickly forgave her son's tardiness, watched him share in Leonard's evening game-play with a gladdening heart.

During breakfast the next morning the news broke, that second story on the bulletin describing the damage done to Camden Town tube over Christmas Day. Their work looked even better on TV Mikey thought, bold and lurid and thrilling, a great explosion of colour the camera panned across as a voiceover claimed the damage would take weeks to put right and cost many thousands of pounds. A London Underground bigwig was interviewed after the footage ended, said the organisation was "appalled" this could have happened and he would personally launch an investigation.

Mikey's phone buzzed, a text from Dwayne asking if he'd seen it, heard what people were saying. Forgetting the risks, Mikey arranged to meet Dwayne at the nearest tube station where they pooled Christmas money to buy a couple of travel cards. The pair spent much of Boxing Day riding in and out of Camden, switching to different parts of the line to observe the decorated platforms, enjoying the surprised faces of travellers as their trains whooshed into that whirligig of rainbow definition, so different from the blandness they'd been passing through. Jumping out with the shoppers, Mikey marvelled at the hallucinogenic splashes once more, a mind-stimulating garishness everyone commented on, Dwayne daring to touch the manifestations, created by him and his friends with resourcefulness and imagination.

The rest of the holiday was one long comedown after that, the remaining days of Christmas elapsing in a flurry of turkey leftovers and bad weather. Mikey remained placid and faintly bored, behaving well in front of his mother while surreptitiously collecting newspapers and freesheets, hoarding articles on this unsolved crime underneath his mattress. Most of the columnists condemned their act, the inconvenience for station workers and expense of replacing equipment rendered unusable. Only one piece was in favour of their display, a commuter impressed by the scale and intricacy of the designs. His quote gave Mikey a warm feeling inside. Even as the world tried to make out everyone was against their achievement, here was his audience, appreciative and roused. Mikey knew there were plenty of others out there who felt the same way, there must have been.

When Christmas turned into New Year Mikey spent the night with Shirelle, got a little drunk but remained in control, stopped himself revealing too much. Within days everyone was back at school, his classmates ignorant of the master criminals in their midst. Mikey heard no playground whispers so even Dwayne must have stayed silent. He would have asked, but Dwayne had pretty much given up on school by the New Year while Jamal felt no need to get in touch with the younger boys. Perhaps Jamal decided they would never top that festive spectacle, so there was no point trying. Mikey didn't mind, preoccupied as he was with coming exams and his girlfriend, allowing himself to drift away from the others, a little further with every passing month.

The last time Mikey saw Jamal was at Dwayne's funeral, head bowed for much of the service, as taciturn as ever and unaccompanied in his pew. Dwayne had been tagging carriages in a depot out west when he was surprised by security staff, ran across the tracks to get away and was hit by an oncoming train.

Shirelle sat beside Mikey during the remembrance, listened to the readings and elegies as she stroked her swollen belly, that womb full of their first child. When her boyfriend's eyes met those of someone across the aisle and the man gave Mikey a brief nod of recognition, she asked who it was. Mikey studied Jamal, remembered everything that had happened and told Shirelle he was an old friend. How they'd been soldiers together once.