

A Museum of Almost

I don't remember when my life got this small. Maybe it happened slowly, cubicle by cubicle, email by email, until one day I woke up and realized I didn't recognize the person typing someone else's words under fluorescent lights. I used to dream in spotlights and velvet curtains. Now I dream in calendar reminders and dusty books. Tonight, for me, was just another day filled with the dull ache of a life I never meant to choose.

Some days, I swear I can feel a version of myself pacing just outside of my skin, tapping her foot, waiting for me to wake up. Everyone in the office had already left hours ago, but here I am stuck at my computer, staring blankly at notes and slideshows. I have nothing to go home to, nothing to look forward to. The same broken down apartment that smells like the windows haven't been open in months, stale and heavy.

I shut down my computer and watched the blue light disappear, leaving only my reflection in the dark screen. Unrested eyes, tense shoulders, a person I barely recognized. I stacked my papers into a neat pile, even though I knew I'd unstack them tomorrow. The office was silent except for the tired hum of the lights. I slipped my badge into my bag; it felt heavier than usual, like it was reminding me of all the days I'd traded for safety. When I finally walked toward the exit, the click of my shoes sounded too loud in the empty hall, like footsteps in a place I didn't belong in anymore.

The air outside felt sharp enough to sting. I wrapped my coat tighter and started the long walk home trying to figure out what happened that made everything in my life go so wrong. I lifted my head up for only a second when I realized I had passed the old Lyric Theater. It had been closed for years, ever since a fire damaged the back rooms and the city never bothered to repair it.

The posters in the display cases were faded and curled. The entrance was usually locked, dark, and dead. But tonight, one of the doors was cracked open. Just a sliver, enough

for a thin line of golden light to spill onto the sidewalk. I stopped. I shouldn't have, but I did. Something inside me jolted awake, like the faint echo of a memory I'd buried under my fear.

I told myself the light was probably just a maintenance thing or a worker, a mistake. Nothing important, but my feet wouldn't move.

Then I heard it.

A low hum. Not music exactly, more like the warm vibration of a crowd settling into seats. That sound didn't belong in an abandoned building. Before I could talk myself out of it, I slipped through the narrow opening and stepped inside.

The lobby wasn't the lobby anymore. The peeling carpet, the broken ticket booth, the dusty chandeliers, everything is all gone. In their place stretched a long, gleaming hall lined with tall glass cases.

Above me hung a glowing sign with the letters that rearranged themselves until they formed words I recognized:

THE MUSEUM OF ALMOSTS.

My heart kicked in my chest. I took a step forward. The floor echoed like a stage. The first exhibit was impossible to miss. A single spotlight shone down on a glass pedestal at the center of the room. Inside sat a pair of scuffed character shoes. Black, size six and a half. My size. The exact kind I begged my mom for in ninth grade when I was cast in my first school musical.

A small plaque read:

THE AUDITION YOU LEFT BEFORE YOUR NUMBER WAS CALLED.

My throat tightened. I saw myself at fifteen, knees shaking, clutching a script so wrinkled you'd think it had lived an entire lifetime in my hands. I watched my younger self stare at the audition door, lips trembling, before turning away and running.

I remembered the moment vividly. Fear had convinced me that I wasn't good enough. Not talented enough, not brave enough. So I walked out.

Seeing that memory again felt like reopening a wound that had never healed right.

I moved deeper into the hall, my heartbeat loud enough that I could almost hear it echo. The next exhibit came into view, a small wooden desk under a soft white light. A single sheet of paper lay on top, edges yellowed, corners curled like they were tired of holding their shape. I stepped closer and felt a chill work its way down my spine.

Across the top of the page, in worn lettering, were the words that froze me in my place:

MY COLLEGE APPLICATION

The page was frozen mid-decision. The box next to "Theater Arts" was empty. The one beside "Business Administration" was marked with a firm, confident checkmark that I don't remember feeling confident about at all.

As I stared at it, the air shifted behind me.

"You spent hours deciding that day."

I turned sharply.

A figure stood a few feet away, or maybe it was a reflection, or a memory wearing a human shape. It looked like a woman slightly older than me, with tired eyes that somehow sparkled, as if she had lived too many versions of my life to be surprised anymore.

I swallowed hard. "Who...who are you?"

She tilted her head. "That's the question, isn't it?"

I stepped back, pulse quickening. "What is this? Why are you-"

She nodded toward the application. "You already know what this is. You're the one who walked away from it."

I looked at the paper again. My handwriting stared back at me, those nervous loops I had when I was seventeen.

"I thought I was making the right choice," I whispered.

She gave a soft sound, half laugh, half sigh. "You thought you were making the safe choice."

My throat tightened.

Her voice softened. “Do you remember what you wrote on the top of that page?”

I frowned. I didn’t. Or maybe I had never let myself remember.

She stepped forward and tapped the glass gently with her knuckle. A name glowed faintly across the top line of the application, like it had been waiting to be read:

Elara Grace Lane.

My full name. The name I never used anymore except on legal documents and tax forms. Hearing someone else say it made my chest ache.

“That’s you,” the woman said. “Not the version who you quit before trying. Not the one who shrank to fit a life too small. That name belonged to a girl who thought she could be anything.”

The words hit me harder than I expected.

I stared at the frozen scene behind the glass, my seventeen-year-old self sitting at the kitchen table, chewing her pen, tracing the theater major box, but never daring to fill it in.

I felt my voice crack. “I was so scared.”

“Of falling?” She asked gently.

“Of wanting too much,” I admitted.

The woman smiled, not unkind, but with a deep sadness. “Elara...you can’t ruin your life by wanting something.”

I wiped the corner of my eye, frustrated at how easily this place unraveled me. “Then why does it feel like it already did?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she looked at the application one last time, then stepped backward. Her form flickered faintly like a candle in the wind.

This is only the second room,” she said. “There’s more you need to see.”

“But wait-” I reached out, but my hand passed through empty air. She was gone. Only the application remained glowing softly beneath the light, showing me the version of myself I left stranded in the past.

The third exhibit waited at the far end of the hall, quieter than the others. Its plaque read: “The Year She Stopped Asking.”

Inside was a dim, cracked kitchen. A calendar hung crooked on the wall, every month blank. On the counter sat unopened mail, a stack of things I had meant to get to but never found the energy for. In the center lay an empty audition form, the edges curled with age.

This one hurt in a different way. It didn’t show a moment I had almost reached for; it showed the year I let exhaustion settle into me like a second skin. The year I shrank.

In the museum lighting, I could see how small I made my life look. When I left the exhibit, I found myself back in the corridor that led to the exit, only now it felt narrower like it wanted me to choose something before stepping out, before letting this place close behind me.

One last display stood before the final door. The card read: “The Life Still Available.”

No scene waited inside, no memory, no loss, just a blank room. Pale and quiet. A single chair. A single light. I looked in, confused at first, until I realized this exhibit hadn’t been formed yet. I still had the power to create or ignore.

For the first time since I entered, I felt something stir, something small, but alive. Not fear. Not regret. Just awareness. My life wasn’t over. But it also wasn’t going to change unless I did.

I stepped back from the empty room. Outside, the air felt newer. Softer. The kind of air that carried the edges of beginnings, the city lights were the same, the street still cracked, the night still ordinary, but I wasn’t.

My apartment would still be small. My office would still be loud tomorrow. My schedule would still be tight. None of that shifted magically. But I had.

As I walked, I imagined one simple future scene, just myself tomorrow evening, filming a short audition clip in my living room. The lighting is terrible. The backdrop is uneven. My voice is a little shaky.

But it would be mine. And that was enough to start.

When I reached my apartment, I paused at the door, my hand resting against the chipped paint. The hallway still smelled like damp concrete and dust. My little apartment waited upstairs, cramped, imperfect, completely real.

I took a deep breath, steady and certain.

The Museum of Almosts stayed behind me, locked in its own timeless halls. But the life ahead of me, the one I haven't lived yet, finally began.