

Excerpt from

AT THE MUSEUM IN RHEIMS

by

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I began to love painting after I learned that I would go blind. Maybe love isn't the right word, because in my condition it's difficult to have feelings for anything external. Another reason is that by now my condition no longer allows me to see clearly, so I can't say with certainty what it is I love, whether it's the paintings that I go to see in the museums, or the act itself of going to look for them, until the time comes when my sight will darken completely. Mind you, there's no reason to go blind at my age, for that matter there's no reason to go blind ever. I could have chosen to retain places that I've never seen before as my final images, certain forests of the Amazon where the vegetation is so lush and dense that it creates a darkness barely less obscure than the darkness that I am about to enter, certain waterfalls in the heart of Africa, whose dazzling whiteness might have delayed that entry, the transparency of certain waters surrounding coral reefs, where – were it to happen there, if I were to become utterly blind there – the transition would perhaps be easier and gentler. Except that the first to decline was my distance vision, which quickly blurred into a kind of hazy border, then an indistinct, palpable opacity. I experienced this opacity, I suffered it, like a cold sweat, like a paralyzing fever, as if it were not just a malady of the eyes but of the entire body; for that matter, it is due to a disease of the body, misdiagnosed and incorrectly treated, that I am going blind. By this time I can see up close, only up close, so close that what's left of my sight is becoming virtually a tactile sensation. That's why I couldn't choose to keep images of men and women as my final impressions, because you can't always look at people closely enough to touch them with your eyes.

Barnabas, a tall Italian young man with black wavy hair, had arrived in Rheims the night before. He had dined and spent the night in a hotel, waiting for sleep to come naturally. He doesn't drink, doesn't take pills. Over time he's taken pains to accept his condition fully, including the difficulty of falling asleep, including that blank moment upon awaking, when you know there's something very disturbing you're about to remember – like the fact that you're going blind – but for one more moment you don't yet remember it. He'd risen, then washed and dressed with care, though colors were indeed a problem. Then he left the hotel. His bearing was strained, with a few impatient bursts and some poignant steps; he tended to drag his feet slightly as he walked, to get a better feel for the ground. Because he was ashamed of his condition, and wanted more than anything to keep it from showing outwardly, he'd managed to make the search for steady footing look natural by adopting a stride that was simply longer. The effort to walk straight and avoid embarrassment sooner or later resulted in outrageous blunders, the kind of blatantly ridiculous situations which a blind, or nearly blind, man can fall into. But in the end he'd even learned to accept the ridiculous as the most difficult aspect. The Museum in Rheims was very close to the hotel, on Rue Henri Jadart; a few more yards and he entered the door. He crossed the *cour d'honneur* of an eighteenth century palazzo, bombé at the top, with its many tall blank windows. He was inside.



As much as I force myself to take my time and look at them very, very slowly, only one painting stays in my mind each time. One from the Prado, one from the Tate Gallery, one from the Louvre, one from the Uffizi, one from some less famous, secondary museum where I may have gone to see just that one, like here in Rheims, where there's actually only one painting that I want to see. I am not a connoisseur of art, I never have been. Nor do I really know what I love about painting, particularly since I don't love all painting. I've seen some very notable works, masterpieces, but I've had to persuade myself of their worth, I had to think that there, for the first time, I was seeing a certain color, a certain light, a

certain scene, a certain perspective – convince myself without even being certain that I was seeing them correctly. But then again I came to painting only by the process of elimination.

In the presence of other paintings, however, works whose title I perhaps knew by name, but which I didn't recognize when I saw them – which I didn't know actually looked like that – my emotion abounded, my excitement was immediate: paintings that stood out, that embraced you, that drew you in. And for a moment I was what I wanted to be: the dice player in a tavern, the officer taking orders from Napoleon amid the smoke of battle, I was a disemboweled horse, or the centurion transfixed by the blood of Christ; at other times I was a glass bottle against a colorful background, I was a lettuce leaf in a still life. These are the paintings I go looking for, these are the images I want to retain. But if I get close enough to make out the figures, nearly touching them, I lose the sense of the whole; and if I take a step back, what is referred to as the painter's step, I can no longer make out the shapes. Let alone colors.

It can happen any time, I know that at any moment I might be plunged into absolute, pitch blackness, and though I push myself to spend most of my time in museums, looking at paintings like those of Corot that I'm now trying to make out, my sight may well switch off completely in the bath tub, at breakfast over a cup of coffee, or at a bus stop.



La vasque de la Villa Médicis, L'étang à l'arbre penché, Souvenirs des rives méditerranéennes, La liseuse sur la rive boisée are paintings that Barnabas passes as he walks by. He walks by them because he hasn't come to see these particular paintings by Corot, he's come for the *Marat assassiné*, the death of Marat painted by David; except that every museum has its self-guided route, you can't skip galleries, you can't get there directly. Anyway he'd like to see these paintings as well, so he stops and leans forward to read the titles on the brass plates. He leans over but not too much, he doesn't want to be noticed, doesn't want anyone at the other end of the room to become aware of his rigidity or

uncertainty and whisper about it, maybe wonder, maybe feel sorry for him. A schoolgirl walks by at the end of the room, and a child is actually eyeing the tall young man whose hands are in the pockets of his raincoat; the boy is staring at him without saying a word, in that silent, awful way kids sometimes stare at things. The schoolgirl continues on, some distracted tourists troop by, and as they move along a young woman can be seen standing in front of a Géricault, a young woman with her back turned, a lovely, exposed back, framed by the cut of her short dress and brushed by the ends of her blond, medium length hair. She doesn't see Barnabas, nor is Barnabas able to see her.

He's struggling with the Corots, and he has the impression that they must be very beautiful paintings. He senses a mystery of landscape in them, but he perceives the Villa Medici fountain as a dark mass: as far as he can tell it might be a boat with a transparent mainmast – the gushing jet – in the center, and the foliage of the two oaks (but are they oaks?) a kind of curtain open onto the cupolas of a city on the water. Yes, perhaps the fountain is none other than a boat, like the boat in the *Pêcheur en barque à la rive*, the next painting, only instead of a boat what Barnabas sees is a tree, toppled or cut down, sticking up from the slimy bottom, and the fisherman doesn't look like a fisherman to him, but rather a gnarly branch jutting out a bit, engulfed by the growth of low vegetation, submerged in the ooze of stagnant water.

The lengthy time that Barnabas spends in front of each painting, the close proximity from which he studies the canvases, the determination with which he tries to make them out, cause an elderly couple to stop and give him a patronizing look, and prompt the guard to get up from his chair and pace warily behind him. The blond young woman, turning away from her Géricault and observing it all, is puzzled for a moment, before she understands.



Maybe because there are moments when things suddenly become clear, or maybe because in paintings where the figures are large, central, paintings which portray people and passions, it's easier for me to distinguish, but I can see

Delacroix's *Desdémone aux pieds de son père* better (if that's what the brass plate actually says): I see the dark billowing garment, I see the pale flesh just above her breast, I see the long windswept hair, I see that she is raising an arm and meeting her father's arm. It's the father who appears blurry to me, perhaps he has his hands out to spurn the daughter, perhaps he's cursing her, in any case I can't distinguish him well, he's too much in shadow. What will I remember about this painting? The fact that a woman is asking to be accepted and loved by her father for what she is, indeed, just because of what she is? The rigidity of a father who binds affection to a course of conduct? Will I remember her gesture? Her father's gesture, which I was only able to imagine? But is there really a father? I know all about what bound Desdemona to Othello, I know about her submissiveness and helplessness, about her final falsehood, how at death's door she preferred to lie and accept the blame rather than accuse others, but what do I know about the father? And is he alone in the painting? Are there others with him? Or did I maybe confuse the shadows, mistake the simple strokes of a background for figures? Like with the clouds, when I could still see them, the least suggestion was enough to give them a form: a huge ship in the sky, a big toothbrush, an enormous crouching animal. I have to guard against imagination that links the stars together, as in a connect-the-dots puzzle, and makes you say "the Great Bear!" or "the Big Dipper!", when in reality they are all distinct, unrelated, not put there to look like anything.



Anne, the young woman, approached Barnabas so quietly that he wasn't aware of it, so absorbed was he by the painting.

Speaking softly she said, "Desdemona is practically kneeling at her father's feet. The father is wearing a voluminous light red robe, and has a beard; he's looking at the woman sternly, harshly, he's pushing her away. Two other figures watch from a door in the background, standing in the doorway, frightened. The light comes from above, it falls entirely on Desdemona's face and upper body."

Barnabas didn't turn around immediately. He took a few moments to control his assorted emotions: surprise at having been discovered, the irritation with himself that he always felt on these occasions, a tender feeling towards the composed tone of complicity in the voice he'd just heard. When he did turn around, her eyes were so close that he was perfectly able to distinguish their shape and transparency, but not their tonality; he thought the color seemed light overall, though he couldn't say what shade of blue it was. The girl looked at Barnabas's eyes in turn; she was surprised that the edge of the black pupil was so distinct – a kind of neat little circle around which the dark brown formed – and she wondered what blurriness and indistinctness on the inside must perhaps correspond to such definition on the outside.

“And the colors?” Barnabas said, turning back to the painting.

“They're mainly browns, aside from the red of the garments and the yellow of the light,” she told him.

“But isn't Desdemona's garment green?”

“No it isn't,” Anne said, smiling. She looked at Barnabas, and looked at the painting. Then she went on in a different tone: “Or maybe it is. Yes. It's green.”

Barnabas continued standing in front of the painting, until the girl said “Let's go on,” and they moved along to the ensuing galleries.



I'm never sure how to behave. On the one hand I'd tend to place my trust entirely in anyone who might approach me, on the other hand I realize that my condition sets me apart from other people. I was already somewhat diffident by nature, now I'm nearly always fearful. I can't see much of her. I saw her eyes, and face, and heard her voice, and I even smelled her. Before my girlfriend left me (I can't blame her for that), we had a way of sniffing each other when we met again after a certain time. In a café maybe, before we even hugged or kissed, we would sniff one another's neck, like a couple of animals, to recognize the smell or to tell

from the smell whether something had changed in the meantime. Anne's smell, the smell of this young woman now, is lightly fragrant, and unfamiliar. I wonder why she hesitated and first told me that Desdemona's garment was red and then said green. Of course I couldn't say whether it is or it isn't, but somehow as I was gradually losing my sight I came to understand how the colors were changing, which frequencies were fading out; I learned to try to guess a color from its opposite, or from the intensity of the tones I was losing.



She always waits for Barnabas to speak first, just as she waits for him to choose which paintings they'll stop in front of, and which they'll pass up. When he stops, she merely reads the title of the painting and the artist's name to him, to spare him from having to lean forward or step closer to the brass plate, then she remains silent. She says softly, "*Les filles de Pélias demandant à Médée le rajeunissement de leur père*, by Charles-Edouard Chaise" or "*Nature morte à la statuette Maori*, by Gauguin" or "*Un cardinal examinant un plan*, by Richard Bonington" or "*Bâteau sur le fleuve, clair de lune*, by Stanislas Lépine" or "*Le spectre de Banquo*, by Théodore Chassériau" or "*La lecture du rôle*, by Renoir."

At first that's all Anne says; she waits. Barnabas doesn't ask for her help, in fact; but if he happens to see a captain on board the boat on the river, in the moonlight, a captain who in reality isn't there, and if he mentions it, Anne describes the figure meticulously in the luminous glow. And if Banquo's evil ghost appears to him standing instead of seated among the other table companions as he is in the painting, she completes the image in great detail, with poses that are not to be found in the canvas. And if Barnabas asks her, "What's depicted on the unfurled scroll being shown to the cardinal?", not realizing that it's not he who can't see it, but that the painting itself is sketchy and vague and only suggestive, Anne describes the plan, feature by feature, of a basilica which an architect is possibly proposing to the cardinal, though it does not appear in the painting. If he asks, "Here, the background of the Maori figurine, what's it like?", Anne disregards the fact that a still life is unlikely to have a landscape as its background

– or maybe for that very reason, to send him a signal – and describes earthen huts made of straw and bamboo reeds; just as she will later describe the lovely face of the actress listening intently to the reading of her role, and the strange, disturbing rapport between the two men standing close to her, the one in front who is reading the lines, and the one behind her, listening.

In this way Anne completes and perfects the erroneous images that Barnabas forms of what he cannot see, or she fabricates them, detail by detail. It cannot be said that she is lying for the sake of lying, or because the situation offers her immunity from possible discovery; and there must surely be a moment, albeit brief, in which she herself is fully convinced of what she is saying, when she herself clearly sees what is not in the paintings, what only Barnabas's desire or imagination has produced, and makes it her own, and is with him in this at least. Though she is also in step with him: from the beginning she instinctively found a pace that takes into account Barnabas's uncertain, renormalized gait. They walk along, side by side in the ivory glare of the museum's galleries, and when they stop and she lies, her voice, soft by nature, takes on fuller resonances, closer, more intimate, more sympathetic, slightly pained.



Was there really a captain on the boat? Was there really a stand of bamboo reeds in the background behind the figurine? And the unfurled scroll presented to the cardinal, did it really contain what she said? I feel like I can see them. At first I'm not sure, but when I hear her voice, when I sense her gaze turn from the painting, it all seems just as she says. As soon as she stops talking, however, the first image I had, *my* image, comes back to me, and then I think that there is no captain there, no bamboo stand, no basilica plan either. But then again, in the end, what difference does knowing whether they were really there make? What does it matter if I remember these paintings as they are, or as I tried to see them, or as she described them to me? Who can assure me that I'll remember them individually when the darkness becomes absolute? Who's to say that they won't merge into a kind of blurry, fused image that will very slowly fade into the past? What's

important is *now*, what's important is *here*. I want her to go on talking, I want her to describe other paintings to me, I want to understand if this elusive sensation I have, about what she says and what I am not able to clearly see, somehow corresponds to what's true. What a waste of feelings that I brushed aside, didn't focus on, didn't admit until later, didn't pursue when I could have! Now each of them is so vital to me, so imperative, that I can't overlook a single one of them, not even the feeling, uncertain though it is, that she's lying to me. But why should she do that?