The Last Artist

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"...I laud your longing for eternity with limits."

--Lorca

Prologue: First Light

For a month each summer he and Katherine lived with Annie by the lake in Algonquin Park. The rest of the year they had their city place and shared an office in a design and typography firm run by one of the country's top artists, an abstract expressionist and colour-field painter who had gained international recognition. For work they did on the side there was a business card—*Ben and Katherine Sand, Creative Design*—though she was really the one who ran things and brought in most of the extra money, as he spent most of his spare time painting. They had met in art school, where their shared enjoyment of books, films, and music softened any collision between his self-imposed creative demands and her more relaxed approach to her own career.

"What's your favourite film?" he asked on their first date.

"*Jules et Jim*. But but I won't drive off a bridge for you," she added quickly. "And yours?"

"I should say *Lust for Life*, but it's actually *Blow-Up*. Those photographs David Hemmings takes are impressionist wonders."

"Did you notice his character has trouble finishing anything he starts?"

He thought of all the preliminary pieces he threw out for each one he completed. "Yeah, but in the end he does see the invisible tennis ball and toss it back into the court."

"What's that all about anyway?"

He gave it a moment. "Everything we can imagine is real, I guess."

"Nice."

"Not me. Picasso."

Their courtship had been sweet but brief before they settled into a two-bedroom apartment close to downtown where they hung Cézanne and Group of Seven posters and kept their books in separate orange crates by the side of the bed. Neither of them had any siblings, and like most of their generation were on the run from their parents, so it was all a bit of an adventure at first in terms of emotional commitment. But their natural affection for one another closed any distances, and as time passed they were comfortable companions as well as lovers.

Soon after graduation they married and replaced the orange crates with a shared board bookcase in the living-room. The posters stayed, but they purchased some prints and even a priced-down lithograph from their boss. Their combined income at the firm and from their own design efforts also allowed them to buy an isolated cabin in a national park from a friend who was moving to the west coast. It was 'off a dirt road that was off a dirt road,' as Ben liked to say, and they revelled in the freedom and isolation. The two Julys there before Katherine became pregnant, were a carefree time of swimming, hiking, and relaxed work—for him taking an easel along the shore to a confluence of water, sky, and pines that he could pretend Tom Thompson hadn't seen; for her setting up a drawing board on the screened-in porch and conjuring new living spaces for urban dwellers.

Ben was a little worried at first about becoming a father. Of course he would provide a safe and stable place to live, saying and doing all the right things to assure their child grew up with self-confidence and well-informed about the world. But he wasn't entirely sure about deeper obligations, given his life was already sub-divided in several different ways that kept him from picking up a brush as often as he wanted to. Then, when he held Annie outside the delivery room, watching her watching him so carefully, his heart turned over and he knew she would take him beyond the usual frames.

They headed for the cabin just a few weeks after her birth, but their usual pattern was interrupted by one of them having to be in constant attendance. Even when she was sleeping, Katherine, who had been up in the night to breast-feed her, wouldn't go farther than the porch where she only fiddled with designs. Although he still went off on his own to paint, Ben felt guilty about spending too much time alone. There were tiny strains in their relationship as a result, but these appeared to be products of their own failures to adapt rather than any dissatisfaction with one another or with Annie's instinctive demands. They loved her dearly, and although she wasn't spoiled in material terms, they did lavish her with all the attention their combined sensibilities and knowledge could provide.

At a very early age, once she could walk and get around a bit by herself, Ben noticed her heightened response to the landscape and wildlife waiting for her in the summer.

"Look, daddy," the three-year-old cried one morning, pointing at a blue jay balanced on a quivering pine branch. "He can't fall into the wind." Another time she told him the paint spots on his hands were "colour-freckles."

Katherine laughed, and said, with just the slightest edge to her voice, "Be careful. I think you've got a partner in crime."

One sunny morning when she had just turned four he had given Annie a new pack of crayons and left her with her colouring book at the table before the big window overlooking the lake. Katherine was in the village shopping, and he had wood to chop. Behind the cabin he split logs for twenty minutes or so, wiping the sweat from his eyes with a torn sleeve and listening to a couple of jays squabble raucously over territory. Once he had cooled down, he would take his easel along an old path that petered out on a rocky spit of land half-covered in water after every storm. Looking north, he would sketch the reflection of cloud and sky

rippled only by the wake of passing loons. Annie would stay close and look for tadpoles in shallow pools. He piled the wood carefully, gathered up a few pieces for the fire, and went back inside. The colouring book lay unopened on the table, the crayons scattered, and Annie was gone.

The wood clattered to the floor as he looked around wildly then stepped quickly to the door and yelled her name. Nothing, not even an echo. Leaping down the hand-cut steps in the bank to their small beach beside the dock, he sought out tell-tale footprints in the sand, but knew in an instant she hadn't come this way. The road to the village was behind the cabin where he would have seen her, and the forest all around was impenetrable for a little girl, so that left only the old path to the point. He raced along it, well aware of the previous night's rain and the way the lake water snaked over the land in unpredictable patterns. "Annie!" he shouted in hope and despair.

She was so small he could easily have missed her crouched behind a large rock, her eyes fixed on its surface, the crayon busy in her hand. But her mother had dressed her in bright blue before she left, brighter than the lake itself glinting so placidly in the morning light. "Annie," he called softly now, not wanting to frighten her as he approached, but her concentration was unbroken. When he reached out to ruffle her hair his fingers never reached her curls as out of the corner of his eye he spied the scrawl of red lines across the lichen-speckled face of the rock.

The crayon was almost down to its stub and still she drew intently though he could not make out any design. It looked like a Leger being born, without as yet any stick figures or recognizable shapes emerging, and he stood watching her with a paternal pride and satisfaction. The little artist at work. What a story to tell Katherine and their friends. He wished he could take the rock back to the cabin and

hang it on a wall because he knew the marks would disappear with the first rain. The camera! he thought. At least then they'd have a copy. Before he could move, she made a squiggly mark in the bottom right-hand corner, her imitation signature in stone. Only then did she look up and hand him the stub. "Painting, daddy" she said, the lilt in her voice suggesting a question not an answer.

1. Return of the Hunters

There was Breughel the Elder and his son, the Younger, both accomplished painters. In the end the father became more famous even though he'd died at forty-four. Sand looked up his personal history, finding that at the Elder's birth in 1525 Michelangelo had been at his peak and only a few years before Luther had nailed his writ to the Wittenberg church door. What an era, filled with cultural as well as military explosions that blurred the lines of many state borders. This painting, at once familiar and foreboding, was a portrait of the purely local and domestic, yet it had stayed the course with the famed outpourings of the Florentine on the Chapel ceiling, and, in today's almost entirely secular age, had a good chance of outlasting the Protestant church.

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They were heading downhill toward the skaters when I heard one of them, Frankje, I think, say, “Let’s have a drink first.”

I was standing just inside the doorway of our inn, looking up at the crooked sign hanging loose and twisting in the wind, which I wanted my husband to fix. I’d been after him for months but he said it wasn’t important, everyone knew we were the *Inn of the Stag* and didn’t care about appearances. “What about the other problem?” I asked him. The sign had faded over the years and you couldn’t make out the lettering or the figure of the animal any more. If people were thirsty, he said, or wanted a bed, they’d find their way and would drink under a smudged boar or a chicken for that matter. Anyway, I saw Frankje and the two others turn toward us, followed by their dogs. I wasn’t going to have that pack inside, pissing everywhere and getting into mischief. But there wasn’t a problem since they stopped outside by the fire where the girls were singeing the pig and started sniffing around the edge of the pit.

“Any luck?” I asked as the hunters came in the door. I could see Frankje had a fox hanging from a rope down his back and the others carried no game at all. But as an innkeeper you had show some interest, didn’t you?

“Naw,” Frankje said, pulling off his fur mittens. “Too cold out there. “This one”—he swung the fox from his back and dropped it on the floor—“must have needed a shit.” They all laughed, and I smiled in return because I was supposed to. “Bring some mulled wine, then, to put a fire in us,” he said.

It was a feast-day and that, along with the cold, was why they’d come back when they did. I’d seen them leave a few days before, heading out for the hut in the woods beyond the fields. It was snug enough out there with a proper fireplace and chimney. They set and baited their traps and often returned with a dozen pelts or more. This time, despite their poor luck, they wouldn’t miss the feast.

"You think that'll feed us all?" Paulus asked, nodding toward the roaring fire outside where the pigskin crackled and gave off a fine smell. He was the shortest of the three, and his leather jerkin almost covered his knees.

"There's another inn down at the river if you want to go there," I replied, meaning the *The Swaying Oak,* "but we've got lots of bread and vegetables from the cellar and plenty of what you'll need." I was talking about his mainly liquid diet of beer and more beer.

"When are you going to get that sign fixed, Henny?" Frankje asked after a long draught of the wine I'd brought them in steaming cups.

"You ask Remy," I said. "He's in charge. Or so he says."

They laughed at my jibe, but it was understood the man about the house did the repairs. You wouldn't see me up on a ladder with my stockings showing.

I went to the door and looked down the hill. Far below the skaters were dancing over the two ponds formed by the frozen river. The snow-covered land stretched away beyond them toward the mountains on one side and the sea on the other. There were a few birds in the trees but only one in flight and it looked like it was in a hurry to reach a warm nest. Immediately below I could see an older woman hunched over against the wind, slide-stepping across the ice, and above her on the bridge a man carrying a load of straw across his shoulders. "That's near done," I shouted at the girls about the pig. They must have been cold out there and ready for their own nip of wine. Meanwhile I pushed the door shut against the winter and went back to my customers. "Give us a hand with the pig, boys," I said, "and there's another cup for each of you."

"We won't turn that offer down," Frankje replied.

They went outside where I could hear them bantering with the girls. Through the window I watched them stick the pig with their pikes and lift it waist-high.

Normally we would have left it outside and people would just help themselves by the fire. But the cold was bone-chilling today so inside it would have to be. They brought it in and set it on the table in the main room, the pork smell filling every nook and cranny of the house.

"Mmm," Paulus said and sliced a piece off from the flank.

"Get away, you," I yelled, smacking his hand. "When you pay for your drink tonight you'll get some meat and bread. Those are the rules, as you well know."

"Sorry, missus." The grease slid down his chin and dripped on his jerkin. The spot was soon smeared when he wiped his hands on his chest.

The third one, the boy, hadn't yet said a word, just sipped his wine so slowly I knew he wouldn't need another cup. A boy I call him, but Piet was almost twenty years old and Frankje's nephew, the son of a sister who had lived down on a bridge-house until she died of a fever when he was still a baby. His father was gone too, from an infected cut when Piet was twelve or thirteen. Raised by his older sister in the bridge-house, he wasn't much to look at, thin and pasty-skinned, but his eyes were bright and when he did speak up he could make us laugh with the way he looked at what was around him, always seeing something in the ordinary that most of us missed in our busyness.

Just then my husband came in from the shed where he'd been stacking barrels of beer and wine. He and Frankje began teasing Paulus about his sloppy manners, my husband telling him he had an extra jerkin he could use for wiping his arse as well. I turned away and began polishing some candlesticks, but not because I hadn't heard such language before. You hear everything in the drinking room of an inn. But a woman who joined such conversation was assumed to be of a certain character, and I wasn't about to allow myself in that company. When I looked up I could see that brightness in Piet's eyes and a half-smile on his lips that seemed to

say ‘I’m with you’ and ‘I see through you’ at the same time. I cleared my throat and polished harder.

The feast got properly underway in the afternoon and by nightfall was in full swing. We had pushed the table with the pig back against one wall along with the benches. Various men were staggering about trying to keep their drink in their cups, while couples were dancing in the middle of the room. The pig meat was coming off in great slices and the girls kept bringing in fresh-baked loaves from the kitchen. Frankje and Paulus hadn’t gone home at all, just waited for their wives to come up the hill, which they did eventually. I didn’t like either of them much, hard women they were, but I supposed they’d been made that way through the years when their men were off so much and they were alone with too many children and chores. Piet had left before the festivities really began in earnest, but I saw him return around dusk and sit in a corner where he could look out at the crowd and not be surrounded by bodies or overwhelmed by words. I swear he held the same cup I’d given him earlier in the day, sipping from it slowly as if it were spring-fed with wine.

A group of men had gathered at the plank trestle where I was serving drinks. Why bother to wander off when you were just going to return for more? They were talking loudly about the usual things—the weather, the crops, the absence of small game at this time of year. We carefully stored away our vegetables and grain at harvest-time, but even so the winters were often hard. That was why the slaughter of a pig was special and a feast-night good not only for the body but the soul. Somehow the subject came around to the matter of our sign.

“It’s not just a matter of hanging it up properly,” one said. “What’s the point of that if you can’t even make out the lettering or the stag?”

"Who cares?" another pronounced, seeming to support my husband's point of view. "We all know this place, and any stranger coming along can just ask where the inn is. Hell, you just have to follow your nose."

"Your red nose," another chimed in, and they all laughed boisterously.

"No, no," said the first. "Every village is distinguished by its signs, beginning with those that mark it from miles away. How would you like it if we didn't have a sign at the crossroads north and south of us, and travelers had to rely on a farmer or, God forbid, a hunter?" He looked mischievously at Frankje and Paulus who were leaning against one end of the plank.

"Better us than a cooper who never leaves the village in the first place," Frankje shouted at the defender of signs.

"What I make holds the spirits that take you on your nightly journeys," the barrel-maker replied. "And how would you like to be faced with a roomful of barrels that didn't spell out their contents. Very frustrating that would be for a man wanting to fill his cup."

"Alright, alright," the red-faced Frankje said, but you can't very well call it the Inn of the Crooked Sign, can you?" He turned to me. "Well, Henny, when are you and your man going to tell the rest of us exactly where we are?"

Just then my husband brushed by behind the trestle carrying a small barrel under his arm. "I know what's in here alright," he said, patting the worn staves with his free hand. "And I've seen enough of you lot to know that after the third cup you don't give a dam where you are anymore or even who you are."

"I made that barrel," the cooper said. "See that small mark on the bottom that looks like a half-circle? That's my mark. Every man has one if he has to use it. Every woman, too," he said, nodding at me. I could see he was serious about this and determined to convince us. "I propose a contest," he called out loudly to

include the dancers and those on the benches. “Here’s one *florijn* from me. Reach in your purses and we’ll soon have a prize for the best new sign that will go up on the Inn of the Stag.” He turned to my husband. “That’s the name you wish to keep?”

“You can have your damn contest! I’ll agree the sign can go up but only if someone else does the job.”

The crowd cheered. I put a wooden bowl on the plank and it was soon filled with coins. I threw in my own and my husband looked at me darkly. He might take a new sign but he wouldn’t pay for it.

“Two weeks from today,” the cooper declared. “We’ll all meet here and decide on the winner.”

There’s not much going on in the village in the depth of winter. Whatever the cold, as long as the wind isn’t blowing too strongly, people will be on the river after Sunday church, double-edged blades tied with leather straps to the bottom of their boots, the steam of their breath turning to ice crystals on their cheeks and chins as they glide along. Feast days aren’t every day so, except for the hunters and regular tavern-haunters, men and women stay by their own hearths for the most part, mending harness, sharpening tools for the spring ground-breaking, and making tallow from beef or pig’s meat for soap, candles, or cooking fat. Children sit by the fire playing card games or Fox and Geese with their red and black pieces on the cross-shaped board, wishing all the while for warm weather. So the sign contest brought us some excitement, especially since the coins in the wooden bowl had added up to twenty *florijns* in the end. It seemed everyone had an idea for a winning sign, though of course not all of them would actually try to make one.

Ours was a business, my husband made clear. Now that he was ready to admit a new sign might be in order, he was not prepared to accept anything paltry in nature. Only the best would do, and he certainly planned to have a chief say in who would take away the prize. Meanwhile, Frankje, Paulus, and Piet went out to their hut again, prepared to stay for some time. “We’ll try to get back for the sign-judging,” Frankje told me, “but you might have to go ahead without us. Just make sure the stag has a great rack of horns. Wouldn’t be a proper stag without them.”

A few days later, I saw Piet walking down the hill toward his parents’ house. There were no dead animals slung over his back, and he seemed so lost in himself that I didn’t call out to ask why he had returned. He was moving through the snow comfortably enough, so I didn’t think he was ill. At the market stall next morning where an old woman sold potatoes to those who had run out or, like me, needed them to feed more than just family, his sister told me he was painting a sign. She hadn’t seen it, she said, but she could smell the oil and, although he cleaned his hands before sitting down for supper, his smock was covered in colours that would never wash off. She also told me the village carpenter was carving a stag in fine-grained wood and several other craftsmen were working on fancy lettering and pretty pictures. I wasn’t astonished by such efforts, but I must say Piet’s involvement caught me by surprise. I hadn’t thought that brightness in his eyes was for sale.

When Piet wasn’t hunting with Frankje and the others he painted shutters and doors, touched up the letters above the apothecary’s window, and brushed a dark sheen of oil into the church pews, all for a bit of money. But as far as painting his own sign was concerned, well, that was new. There were more than a few men in the village whose craft skills outshone his, and those like the carpenter could

handle a chisel with the delicacy of a brush. I'd always thought there was something special about Piet, though not that he was a craftsman of any kind. His particular knack was in the way he saw the world the rest of us took for granted. My granny used to say that anyone could see through an oak door if there was a hole in it. But Piet didn't seem to need that hole or even to open the door to have a good idea of what was on the other side. There was no reason to join any of this to the sign he was painting. Even when his sister invited me into her kitchen for a cup of tea and told me a story from his childhood, I didn't really sit up and listen. Later on, of course, I put the pieces together.

When he was a boy of nine or ten, she said, he used to hunt with their father up in the high foothills right to the steep rise of the mountains. On one trip they went further than usual, not from any plan but because the weather was good and they were finding lots of small game on the move. They entered an area where they hadn't been before, one filled with tree-lined slopes and narrow ravines from which coveys of birds would suddenly burst, filling the air with their cries and feathers. At the head of one of these gullies they split up and agreed to meet at the far end. The father wasn't worried about Piet who had always listened to him about the dangers of bears and wildcats and how to find his way with the movement of the sun and stars. But an hour after he'd reached their meeting point and his son still hadn't appeared, he began to search the side of the ravine Piet had walked along, and to call out his name. He couldn't find any tracks along the edge and, peering down into the thick tangle of bushes and small trees that clung to the steep slant of dirt and stone, he knew that if Piet had slipped and fallen in it would almost impossible to see him. That night he built a fire and, between snatches of sleep, kept calling Piet's name. All the next morning he continued his search, venturing down into the ravine but unable to reach the bottom. It was very deep,

and far below him he thought he heard the sound of running water. After many hours of struggling up and down the ragged slopes he was ready to give up and return to the village for help. Frankje's hunting pack would surely find him. Sweating and disheartened, he staggered out of the gorge near to where they had agreed to meet the day before and there was Piet lying pale and bruised at the foot of a large boulder.

The father shook his boy by the shoulders and when he didn't respond spattered his face with water from his leather drinking bag. Finally Piet awoke, but it took him some time to recognize his parent and understand where he was. His father insisted he rest and eat a little food before they headed home, but even though the colour came back to Piet's face and he became quite excited as he talked, the tale he told of his day and night in the ravine didn't make much sense.

He had lost sight of his father after they had gone their separate ways, but knew the line of the ravine would eventually bring them back together. Walking along, stepping carefully over rocks and tree roots at the edge of the precipice, he listened to the birdsong and kept his eye out for squirrels and even slightly larger creatures that he could bring down with a stone from his sling. He was carrying a short pike he used as a walking stick to keep his balance. Then one moment he was beneath the open sky watching a hawk circle far above and the next he was tumbling down the slope through undergrowth that slowed but didn't stop his fall, the pike hurtling from his hand, his head bouncing against the hard earth, and his flailing limbs crashing through bush thickets and off sharp ridges. The world kept spinning wildly and though his eyes were open he could see only flashes of colour on a black wall of pain. Finally he splashed into a small stream at the bottom, battered and dazed but with no bones broken.

Lacking the strength to attempt a return to the surface right away, and still in a stupor, he began to follow the stream-bed, walking without knowing it, toward the meeting-place with his father. The ravine floor climbed but the sides became higher and steeper. He stopped to rest and drink from the stream, and once, as he brought his cupped hand to his mouth, he thought he heard his father calling his name. He yelled back but the sound of his voice was swallowed by overhanging stone that soaked up any echo before it could rise to the world above. Most of the wall above him was covered by hanging vegetation, long green vines that he might employ if he tried to climb and clusters of beautiful red and yellow flowers of a kind he had never seen before. While he was absorbed in the shape of nearby petals, and wondering how they grew in such plenty where the sun hardly reached, he saw the drawing.

The day of the prize-giving I was very busy with preparations. I roasted fowl and baked some cakes along with our usual supply of bread. The girls scrubbed down the tables and benches and hung some ribbons from the rafters and above the door. Word of the contest had spread to other villages and messages were sent in reply that several guests would stay overnight, so that meant our three rooms had to be made ready. It was quick work to open a window and air them out what with the wind blowing and the cold freezing fingers on the hasps. In the afternoon I built small fires in all three and leaned the warming pans against the chimneys. The girls would put them between the sheets later in the evening. Our guests would be quite snug for the night, though a good part of their warmth would certainly come from the spirits they swallowed before retiring. In the main room the large fireplace was filled with flame and heat all day, and some of the frost on the windows had melted and was running off the panes to make little puddles on the

floor. The girls stuffed cloths along the ledges to soak up the trouble. I asked my husband if he was going to take down the crooked sign, and he said no, we'd wait to see if there was a suitable replacement. "Will you fix it if there isn't?" I asked, but he didn't reply.

People began to arrive around dark, which at that time of year, was in late afternoon. Soon the main room was crowded with drinkers, and the girls and I filled glasses until our arms and wrists were sore, while my husband carried so many kegs from the cellar he didn't bother to close the trap-door. After an hour or two of rowdiness, the cooper stood up on a bench and called for attention, patting the air in front of him with his outspread palms to settle the noise.

"Friends! Friends! We should first thank the good owners of this establishment for their hospitality tonight."

There was much clapping and whistling, and I kept my head down all the while. My husband, wanting to see what was going on, emerged from the cellar too quickly and banged his head on the trap-door. Everyone laughed when the cooper said, "Any sacrifice is not too small." Then he cleared his throat. "We all know that in another few weeks, perhaps even days, that sign outside, left unattended, will sag low enough for the same thing to happen to the shortest of us here as just happened to our landlord. What's more, we won't be able to read what we've been hit by. So the prize tonight of twenty *florijns* is for a new sign with clear letters and picture that will be properly hung." He gave a big-toothed smile to the crowd. "Let the contestants bring forward their entries! You there," he said to three louts, "shift off that bench so we have some room."

Everyone looked around expectantly. For a moment it seemed as if no one would step forward, but the carpenter finally did so, his effort wrapped in red cloth like a Yuletide gift. He was followed by three craftsmen from our village and one

from a hamlet down the river. Their wrapping was plainer but hid their work just as well from our prying eyes. I looked around for Piet, who hadn't been visible since I'd seen him slip in earlier on. There was a little hubbub near the back window, and someone shouted, "C'mon Piet, lift it up, it's not a church pew." There were a few more friendly jeers as the crowd parted and Piet came out into the centre of the room, his sign swathed in animal skins, his bright eyes, as usual, looking through us to another side we couldn't see.

"Put it with the rest," the cooper told him somewhat impatiently. "Anyone else?" he called out loudly. "That's six entries, then. I'll ask for them to be unwrapped. Everyone can have a look and then we'll decide by a vote of hands which one wins the prize.

"I have to approve!" my husband shouted.

"And me!" I cried, not to be outdone in the running of the inn. After all, he hadn't cared about appearances until now."

"Alright," the cooper said. "The rest of us will choose the best two efforts and you can decide between you which one you'll have. How's that?"

"And if we can't agree?" my husband said a little sourly.

"You did agree to have this contest, so if you get silly about things now, we'll just have to move our trade down the hill. What do you say to that?" he demanded of the crowd.

"Yes, yes, down to *The Swaying Oak*!*!*" they yelled back. "No more drinking here without a new sign!"

The cooper turned to my husband who signalled grumpily that he was prepared to go along with things. Everyone assumed, quite rightly, that I was ready to choose.

When the cloths and skins had been removed, the crowd rushed forward and obscured the benches from those who lagged behind. I could hear ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ and then some laughter and loud exclamations. “Oh Piet,” someone said, “better stick to those pews and shutters!”

“Stand back, now,” the cooper declared, “and let the others see.”

The ones at the back pushed their way through, and the cooper called to my husband and me to have our look. “You can’t say anything for the moment,” he said. “We’ll hear your opinions about the two we choose.”

“Well, I know what I like,” Paulus yelled out. “And what I don’t,” he added, giving Piet a hard stare.

When I stood before the lined-up offerings, four of them, while done skilfully enough, were much what I expected—pictures of a huge stag with a great rack of antlers standing in a meadow or on a mountain slope. The animal’s skin colour on each of these signs was a familiar tan, his horns a darker shade, with the mountain and field either clothed in snow or summer greens and browns. One drawing in particular seemed more true-to-life, perhaps because the stag’s leg muscles were stretched in a way that made me feel its worry about an approaching enemy. Across the bottom of the four pieces were black letters of varying sizes that spelled out *Inn of the Stag* so plainly I felt that I was seeing the name for the first time.

The carpenter’s wood-carving was glorious. Whatever chisel he had used couldn’t have been thicker than a single strand of paintbrush because the stag’s features were so finely shaped, including the sixteen points of his horns that I counted. It seemed he was ready to leap from the wooden pen that held him and leave his hoof-prints on our astonished eyes. The top of the mountain behind him was half-covered with the outline of a cloud, and small trees and rocks stood out from the uneven level of the slope. The letters below were cut in curling sweeps of

wood that leaned to the right as if blown by an invisible wind bearing smells of pines and flowers beyond the frame. The whole was covered in a sheen of oil that shone in the flames of the fire and promised never to fade. My mind made up, I blew my breath out with puffed cheeks and turned to look at Piet's painting.

All I could see were bright patches of colours and swirling lines going everywhere across the wooden panel. None of it made any sense. I kept searching for the stag but all I found were blobs and streaks of paint, heavy black and brown ones that showed the strokes of the brush, and lighter ones as thin as an eggshell wandering over the board in lost curving lines of red and blue. Whatever it was confused me and hurt my eyes, and I could tell from the murmurings beside and behind me that others were baffled and suffering too. There were no letters top or bottom to mark the inn. Either Piet had forgotten or he hadn't finished the work. Still, there seemed no place for the letters. Every inch of the sign was already covered by paint. But for all that, I couldn't turn away.

"It's a bloody mess, that's what it is," Paulus announced.

"Now, now," said the cooper. "I'm sure Piet can tell us what it's supposed to be." He waved his arm at the back of the room. "C'mon Piet, get up here and explain yourself."

I watched him walk slowly through the crowd and thought I'd never seen a villager as alone before. Even so, he had a strength about him and his eyes were shining. He stopped and looked at all the other efforts lined up on the bench, pausing longest before the wood-carving that we all knew had won the prize. Paulus aside, we were not about to mock one of our own. Piet had tried and failed but he still deserved support.

He stood and studied what he had done, rubbing his chin, and even reaching out once to trace a sweeping line with his finger. Then he turned and said quietly, “It’s called *The Dancing Stag*.”

“But there’s no stag!” Paulus cried out.

“Yes, it’s here,” Piet replied, and using the same finger he followed arcs and stripes of all shapes and sizes without hesitation so the horns and hooves and moving body were revealed, for him at least. Just for an instant I thought I could see some horn-tips and the flickering end of a tail, but they quickly disappeared into blobs of colour or lines that refused to join one another and make a picture I could understand.

“Where are the letters?” my husband asked, more politely than I would have expected. “You can’t have an inn sign without letters.”

Piet smiled. “People will know the name of the inn,” he said.

“How will people know?” The cooper sounded a little exasperated.

“Perhaps they’ll talk about the painting and what it’s called. Perhaps neighbours will tell neighbours and villagers will tell those from other villages. Perhaps travelers will be curious and end up staying the night.”

“That’s a lot of ‘perhaps’, Piet,” I said.

He looked through me like he had before to that other invisible side of things. “I’m sorry, missus. It’s what I saw.”

That’s when I remembered his sister’s story.

Just then the cooper announced a decision had to be made. We all knew what was going to happen. The crowd called out the carpenter’s name as one. There was no opponent for the prize-winner.

“Well,” my husband said, obviously pleased, “I’ll hang it up tomorrow.”

The cooper took the bag of twenty *florijns* from his pocket and gave it to the carpenter amidst much clapping, the other contestants included. I looked over at Piet who was staring at his painting, his lips moving as if he was conversing with the elusive figure of the stag. Determined to ask him about the drawing he had seen in the mountain ravine, I stepped toward him, but he suddenly picked up his work and strode from the room.

When they had returned from the mountains, his father didn't want people to think of his son as touched or slightly crazy because he claimed to have seen a drawing of a stag that wasn't exactly a stag on a rock wall. Piet meanwhile usually had that look in his eyes that I've already mentioned and was never very talkative at the best of times. So the story was buried until, just before he died of the infection, the father told the tale of the ravine to his daughter, the one who passed it on to me. I guessed the inn sign was a version of something he'd seen up there, waiting for its moment to become visible to the rest of the world. There was no other explanation for those lines and colours. But I still didn't know if there was there an actual drawing in the ravine. Had he hit his head falling down the steep side and had some kind of dream before he woke up in the stream-bed or some kind of vision because his brain kept dancing as he stumbled toward the spot where his father found him? I was kept occupied with the girls the next morning cleaning up the mess of cups and spilled food, but after mid-day I went down the hill to the bridge-house.

He was sitting on a stool in a sheltered part of the garden mixing some paint for two new shutters lying nearby.

"Piet," I said, never one to waste time, "your sister told me about the drawing in the mountains."

He laughed. “You believe it, then?”

“Can I see your sign again?” I asked.

He went into the house and returned directly with the brightly-coloured board.

“Is that what you saw up there?”

“Not exactly, missus.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s what I think I saw. My father found me half asleep and confused as if I had hit my head. All I could remember was pulling the flowers aside and seeing a dancing stag. But it wasn’t a stag like the one the carpenter and the others made. It was...”

“Yes, Piet?”

“It was like colours, moving colours, came first, and then the stag jumped out of the colours at the painter.”

For some reason I could see the words I heard, like marks on a table-top from a wet cup of wine. I gazed at the sign, letting the colours wash over my eyes, and for the first time glimpsed the animal shape he had traced out the night before. It vanished almost as soon as I saw it, but when I turned away and looked back there it was again, shimmering and shifting into new positions of its dance. “Oh, Piet,” I said, “it’s beautiful.”

He laughed again. “I went back, you know, many times. But I could never find that wall again. I went down any number of ravines more than once, but there were no hanging flowers and no drawing. Maybe I did imagine it after all.”

“Why didn’t you paint it before now? Why put it on a simple inn sign?”

He rubbed his chin and looked at his achievement. I didn’t think he was going to answer me, but finally he spoke up. “It was waiting for a space that would free it

from down there. A space that would let it dance for many people, not just hang on someone's inside wall."

"I'm going to talk to my husband," I said.

"Good luck, missus. Not everyone can see what you can."

I went back up the hill and found my husband on a ladder outside the front door. The old sign was on the ground beneath him and he was holding up the carpenter's carved glory ready to fasten it to the waiting metal bolts.

"Hold on," I said.

There's no need to repeat everything I said to him and he to me, but the gist of it was that while it might be his inn, I wouldn't work in it unless he figured out a way to hang Piet's sign too. At first he said he'd put it above the back door, but I said that wasn't enough. Well, he told me, the carpenter's sign is staying. I agree, I replied, and then I saw what to do.

"Look," I said. "We agree the carpenter has made a fine stag and pleasing letters besides. Anyone walking up to our door will know exactly where he is."

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, what if we hang Piet's sign on the back of the carpenter's. People coming from that direction will be attracted by the bright colours. They'll suppose the name of the inn is on the other side, as indeed it will be."

He hummed and hawed for a while just to show me he was in charge, but in the end my threat to stop working won the day. After all, what good is an inn without a woman's touch, whatever the sign hanging outside its door?

Piet came up the next morning and he and my husband attached the two signs back-to-back. I guess because it was finally free, Piet did the painting again and hung it out of the weather on his sister's kitchen wall. "Nothing lasts forever," he said, "except maybe what I saw behind the flowers." He's married now with two

daughters and a son named Piet we call the Younger. The boy draws pictures of animals everyone recognizes and praises. But once in a while he shows me boards covered in colours that dance across my eyes like eternal hooves and horns.

2. The Vortex

The sun came over the rooftops as Ben walked to the café for his morning coffee. It was still cool in the shade, and he saw the steam rising from the red slate roofs of the houses in the winding street. This day should be like any other, but it wasn't. Not so long ago he hadn't known about the illness, hadn't thought much about his mortality because he was still fit and working, and the inevitable point at which he wouldn't be able to pick up a brush or see the canvas clearly wasn't on his horizon except in some vague, generally human way. Now the test results had come in. A year more or less, the doctor said, eighteen months at most. Any pain towards the end could be taken care of by drugs, but for much of his remaining time he'd feel reasonably healthy. Apart from some weight loss he'd look pretty much the same as well. No chemo or radiation was going to help, so he'd keep his hair. My hands, he'd asked, what about them. Oh, the doctor replied, no problem. Then he smiled.

"Unless, of course, you develop arthritis." They'd known each other since he'd come to the town thirty years before, so the smile wasn't out of place between friends.

"I'll try not to," he replied dryly.

Yes, today was different. Sitting at his favourite outdoor table, he scanned the front page of the newspaper. None of the headlines and stories seemed relevant to what he had to consider. The words were about life ongoing, while his own existence was winding down and due to end shortly. The war that involved so many countries in the fight against terrorism would undoubtedly rage on as he made his exit; the struggle against global warming would certainly be just as inefficient, despite the worthy efforts of some citizens and governments. He turned to the back of the first section. There on the obituary page were the immediately relevant tales. He scanned these brief summaries that tried so hard to represent lives lived over the past eighty or ninety years and often much less than that. What did the dead think of these final pronouncements? Were they tickets to the beyond or just paper headstones that blew away as the memories of survivors faded? He sipped his coffee. If he died tomorrow, what would be written?

Ben Sand had been a pretty good painter, they'd probably say, and go on to discuss his career as an expressionist artist who had never quite slipped over into the abstract. How, after establishing his Canadian reputation as a member of the 'wilderness school', he had rather abruptly left his native land for European travels and eventual settlement in southern France. Not for obscurity, mind you, because his fame had grown as he soaked up the terrain and colours of the Midi-Pyrénées region and the features of its inhabitants, and his completely new style of work sold well in New York and London. Some might even suggest he had achieved a certain kind of greatness so it was possible to mention him in the next breath after

the giant figures who had defined the second half of the last century, but such ranking didn't concern him. He'd done his work and been shaped by it for almost fifty years. Yet for all his immersions in lines and light, colours and tones, and his intense focus on his subjects of the day or month or even longer, he was consistently aware of his paintings as mere gestures against the passing of the years. Naturally, those years were always running out and that meant the number of gestures was inevitably fixed. How had Shelley described his poems? 'Alms against oblivion.' But as long as he had been able to work he had seen his way forward, and that had always been enough.

Now things had changed. He idly watched a flock of doves whirl upward above a church steeple into a cerulean sky that absorbed their pink-grey plumage then released it as they swooped down into shadow. Across the square the baker unfurled his canvas canopy and opened for business. A scruffy brown dog wandered from lamppost to lamppost then sat down abruptly and watched the passers-by. Despite this deliberate pace, the small town was part of the global community with an internet café just around the corner and a major highway fifteen kilometres away. But most of what he observed today belonged to other centuries as well. Cézanne had sat in a similar square in Provence during the Franco-Prussian War. Courbet had done so in Burgundy before that. Sand had settled in France because such connections to the past were very different from those back home that bound him to the lakes, forests, and huge skies he had painted as a young man, the pine shaped by the prevailing west wind, the flash of an overturned canoe on calm Algonquin water.

What mattered, he realized now that he was soon to lose it, was the company of those he liked to imagine sitting comfortably with him at his table or walking out into the countryside and arranging their easels beside his. They had scraggly beards

and nicotine-stained fingers and, like him, didn't have much to say. Finding a way on preoccupied them, a road beyond the frame of their last painting. He stopped himself. It was like that for every painter who tried to *see* everything and knew that each day's work was just a fraction of the whole. He was romanticizing France and the European tradition. Well, maybe so, but, for better or worse, it was what he believed in, and even now, as he was soon to join the line of shades who never did see it all, he was supported by that belief.

He gave an involuntary shrug of his shoulders. Was his to be a paper headstone too? How long would he be remembered after his death? He'd lost his only child, and after the subsequent divorce, her mother had vanished into another marriage. He'd had other relationships, of course, but none of them lasted. For more than a year after Annie's death his grief overwhelmed him and he did barely any work. As the daily pain lessened but never disappeared, he put his painting first and became content with living alone. Although he'd never returned to the cabin, the woods and water elsewhere in the north had sustained him, and he slowly built up a collection of work that was purchased by museums, galleries, and private buyers until one day he realized he was repeating himself.

His colleagues were no more surprised than him that he would walk away from his cultural heritage, especially when the critics were starting to pay serious attention, but what was it a revered folksinger had said of the wilderness? "The green dark forest was too silent to be real." Human absence summed up most of the paintings he had done, splendid as their forms and colours might be, and it seemed more and more likely to him that he couldn't people his Canadian landscapes because of Annie. He had to start again.

After some time in London, Amsterdam, and Paris taking in the street scenes, he drifted south until he could see the Pyrenees in the distance. He didn't know he

was looking for the town until he found it resting quietly in a valley off the beaten track, its church spire by far the tallest structure and its central square an intimate space of cobblestones, plane trees, and a populated past. On his first day in the hotel he felt out of sorts, and the hotel owner sent him to Aurelio. The doctor recommended only rest and an over-the-counter iron pill, but the prescription for friendship had lasted much longer.

The friends he'd left behind in Canada had dropped away over time, and Aurelio and Claudia here in town were not much younger than him, so on a personal level he'd persist only briefly in a pair of memories. As for his art, yes, it gave him all sorts of business connections with dealers and gallery owners, and hung in various museums and numerous private collections, but while his paintings might stand up against a century or two, they probably wouldn't pass the test of a millennium, even if the civilized world were to last a thousand years. Besides, such longevity wasn't just a matter of critical taste but of the materials of painting themselves. Oils and water-colours inevitably faded and acrylics hadn't been around long enough to judge. And what if one or more of those front-page catastrophes occurred, natural or man-made? Floods, earthquakes, bombs, or even global warming to the extent that life's relationship with art was negated by the need to stay alive. He imagined the Louvre in decay, stripped of its most-prized possessions that had been sold on black markets of desperation, the rest exposed to the elements, hanging on crumbling walls under no one's gaze until they just rotted away. Perhaps after a thousand years had passed, aliens would arrive and find no cultural records extant, at least no artistic ones. He shivered. His coffee was cold and his thoughts were making him so as well. The dog was still sitting by a lamppost across the square, but the doves had gone home to roost. Best return to his studio and make a gesture.

His farmhouse was a fifteen-minute drive from the town. Perched on a south-facing slope, it was a comfortable home with all the basic conveniences, including a woodstove that heated even the coldest corners when the winter temperature occasionally dropped to North American numbers. The large front window showed the foothills of the mountains in the near distance, and when the wind blew in the right direction, clearing the air, the high peaks themselves were brilliantly honed. He had often driven up into the heights and even on to Andorra a few times, never tiring of the precipitous ascent and downward return journey where the light would scatter as it was deflected from the crags and the sparse vegetation and limestone boulders would glow in their strikingly different ways.

He recalled his return from one such journey when he'd turned off impulsively on a narrow, unexplored track filled with small rocks and fallen branches. Eventually he found a slight widening and was able to turn around. Seeking a view, he got out of the car and began to walk uphill. The track soon became a path and then nothing more than a barely visible trail petering out beside a steep, boulder-strewn incline that would take too much energy to climb. He looked down across the valley below him, the greens and browns of it with their subtle hues, and saw the river he had crossed half an hour before, spring water high beneath the boards of the bridge. Then he considered the rock-covered rise in front of him that probably no one had stepped on for decades or more. There had been no fences near the track entrance so this was likely government land, useless for development and left to the wind and small creatures that inhabited it. As if in confirmation, a rabbit hopped out from between two boulders just a few meters away, blinked its eyes at him, and disappeared back into the gap. He walked over, expecting to find a burrow entrance, but there was no sign of the creature or its companions. Perhaps

it was simply crouching on the other side of the rock. Forcing himself past the thick, pungent branches of a pine he saw a low vertical cut in the hill-side not much wider than his body. A cool stream of air brushed his cheek as he leaned into the fissure and he knew it was a cave.

Sand had seen the Paleolithic cave-art in Lascaux II and Font-de-Gaume in the Dordogne, only a few hours away to the north. The former was a reconstruction rather than the original cave that had been closed to the public for preservation purposes since 1948. So what people saw were replicas of the famous Hall of Bulls and the narrow Axial Gallery with its intricate and delicate renditions of horses and cows. Stunning reproductions , but still copies in a climate-controlled atmosphere that lacked the muck and depth of the actual cave. Font-de-Gaume was the real thing, however, and he had been staggered by the beauty and expressiveness of the original paintings—mammoths, reindeer, bison, and indecipherable lines off by themselves or inside one of the animals. Experts had debated the meaning of these lines for decades, usually agreeing they were a code of some kind without final translation. He didn't care about that. What overwhelmed him was the skill of the artists who, twenty thousand years ago, were able to paint with the vision and finesse of a da Vinci or Picasso. There were hundreds of known caves in France and Spain on either side of the Pyrenees, and even older paintings had been discovered at Chauvet in the Ardèche, placed on the walls and ceilings a full twelve thousand years before those at Font-de-Gaume. The works from each era were more than comparable, putting paid to the evolutionary theory of art that emphasized things only got better as time passed.

Excited by the thought that there might be previously undiscovered paintings inside this cave, he trekked back to the car for a flashlight and a pair of rubber boots he always kept in the trunk. Returning to the entrance he squeezed through,

pointing the light ahead of his feet to pick out any precipice or sudden turn. Immediately inside he found some shattered bottles on the dirt floor. The thick, brown shards of glass weren't of recent manufacture. He put one flat, smooth-edged piece in his pocket. The passage remained very narrow for a few meters then widened so he could just manage to walk along without rubbing his shoulders against the walls. Something small and light brushed past his feet, probably the rabbit. He descended slowly through twists and turns as the air became noticeably cooler and began to wonder if he should go much farther without a rope. Then suddenly the passage opened out into a large chamber, perhaps as tall and wide as his farmhouse.

His light shone along the walls and across the ceiling. They were fairly smooth, and no stalactites hung from the high dome. As far as he could tell the rock faces were bare of markings except for occasional striations of darker rock in the limestone. All his subsequent examination of the perimeter of the chamber revealed no openings that would take him deeper underground. He found more broken glass and some preserved footprints in the dirt that disappointingly looked to be from a large pair of boots rather than bare soles. There were also the remains of a fire, stones piled around burnt pieces of charcoal, which meant air-vents in the ceiling or high in the walls. Were the footprints and fire connected? He bent down to feel for the warmth, touching the cold ash, and laughed at himself for such naivety.

Somewhat disenchanted, he made his way back to the sunlight. It had been a shelter, nothing more. But, realistically, that would have been the primary concern of men and women so long ago, not creative display. For all the numbers of cave-art sites, there would be countless caverns like the one he'd just found, places of refuge from the storms, animals, and other humans that threatened daily existence.

He drove on to his home and put the shard of glass on his desk as a paperweight. It reminded him of the cave on occasion, but he had no desire to return.

Now he went into his studio at the front of the house with the window view of the high southern ground. Stacked against three walls were abandoned canvases and a handful of completed paintings. He usually turned the finished works inward so he wasn't distracted by them as he stood at his easel. But one, a realistic portrait of a young girl, remained face out as he moved on to other subjects and forms. He'd finished the piece a few weeks ago, feeling it somehow displayed precision and elusiveness all at once. Most portraits, including his previous endeavours, had the eyes looking directly back at the viewer. This created a kind of intimacy, the proverbial window into the soul, especially important when representations of younger, innocent subjects were usually done at the request of parents seeking to keep such purity intact. But in this most recent effort the girl was staring over the left shoulder of the viewer into a distance that belonged to her alone. He had painted her many times before, but this time her gaze was so strong and focused he wished he could see through her eyes.

As for her other features, there were the usual dark, curling helmet of hair, high cheekbones and snub nose above the slight uplift to the right side of her mouth, the onset of a smile or just a signal that still-life was never really that but only a moment's pause before breath or movement. Centuries from now, if someone looked at the painting would she be recognized as the drowned daughter of a celebrated artist or an unknown subject who couldn't be identified in time's relentless flow? How much did that amount to the same thing, after all?

That day in the national park he had propped Annie in the bow of the canoe held in place by his easel and knapsack, her orange life-vest shining like a beacon

in the early morning light. He and her mother always arranged things this way when they took her out alone. They had taught her to swim when she was three, and were confident her splashy dog-paddle and the buoyancy of her vest would keep her afloat if they ever tipped over. Of course, both of them would be right there beside her in the water, laughing at how wet they were and praising her tiny strokes. Not that there was any chance of an accident as they never ventured out with her when the wind was up.

Katherine wasn't feeling well, so he and Annie would cross to the island and take a photo of the rock-drawing. He had thought of taking his paints with him, but decided it would be too difficult to reproduce in the bobbing canoe even if he tied up to shore. Besides, he had his sketchbook to capture details outside the camera's aperture and those the lens would flatten out. Annie was quiet most of the way across until he pointed out a flock of ducks lifting off from the smooth surface and told her their shiny green-black heads meant they were Mergansers whose nickname was 'sawbill' because they had tiny sharp points along their beaks.

"Do they live in the water," she asked.

"No, that's just where they hunt for fish. Their nests are up in trees. That's where the moms lay their eggs."

"How do the baby birds get to the ground?"

"The mom teaches them to fly when they get a bit bigger."

"What does the daddy do?"

"Oh he brings fish back to the nest and watches out for the bad guys."

"Bad guys?"

"Yeah, like foxes or those big cats called lynx."

"But foxes and cats are bigger than him."

"That doesn't matter, honey. The daddy can take care of them"

When they came around the far side of the island they glided along the base of the cliff, his paddle barely touching the glass sheen while she chirped excitedly about seeing the turtle again.

As he drew the canoe alongside the green shell and yellow lightning stroke, both lightly outlined in red, he noticed a flat outcrop of rock a few feet away that he could stand on to keep the camera steady. He wanted to see the lines and colours without any distortion. Moving into a half-crouch, he felt the turtle eye watching him while he braced the paddle against the rock and cautiously put his leg over the side. It was a stretch, but he could make it.

"Where are you going, daddy?"

"Don't worry, I'm..." but the paddle blade suddenly slipped straight down into the water pulling the rest of his weight against the edge of the canoe and flipping it up into the back of his head. Stunned, he fell forward onto the outcrop with his legs floating by the overturned craft that covered Annie beneath. When he finally came to and managed to turn and lift the canvas shroud it was too late. She lay face-down, the blood oozing through her hair where the gunwale had thumped her skull, and all his efforts at resuscitation were in vain.

Sand stared at the portrait. Without the accident Annie would be middle-aged now, likely a mother with grown daughters as grandchildren for him and Katherine. But it seemed he would always paint her as she was just before the canoe trip, without guile or self-consciousness, though her eyes in the latest portrait were trying to show him something he hadn't seen before. He went over to the sink and rinsed his face with cold water, trying not to dwell on his wife going to pieces and himself barely hanging on through his sorrow and guilt. They had

divorced within a year of Annie's death and hadn't spoken since that final day in court over forty-five years ago.

"What will you do now?" he'd asked Katherine after the judge had approved the financial settlement both had agreed upon. Neither of them had been back to the cabin since that last summer nor wanted anything more to do with it. The property would go on the market immediately.

She blinked away the tears filming her eyes. After their shock and first horrific wave of grief, she had not openly blamed him, but it was clear she could not forgive him either. He understood that, though he had to bury his own inability to absolve himself in order to keep on. They had struggled to maintain even the surface of their relationship for a few months and then she moved out.

"It doesn't matter, Ben." She frowned. "I know what you'll do though."

For several moments she was silent and he thought she wasn't going to say anything more, but she wouldn't let him off so easily.

"You'll paint, won't you? As if you can brush her away. And you'll be good at it, I know you will. But one day I hope you stand in front of a canvas that tells you how small in time everything you create is compared to the few years we had with her." The tears were running down her cheeks now, and he felt they were both in a painting together that was dissolving as they shared the memory of their daughter for the last time.

Her accusation hadn't been fair, had it? Not then, at least. He was only just beginning to sell his work when Annie died, and painting hadn't yet completely engrossed him. But what if he'd been less focussed on the drawing and the turtle's eye as he tried to exit the canoe? He shook his head. There was no point in reliving those moments. Anyway, she'd been right in her prediction. In order to survive in the long term he had to keep painting, and that had eventually meant leaving

Canada behind with all its attendant memories of water, trees, and sky and seeking out a different landscape and human history in which to immerse himself. Turning the portrait girl's face to the wall, he did what he had always done since that day and gave his attention to the work-in-progress on his easel.

It was, on the one hand, a straightforward depiction of his farmhouse seen from behind and below, so the night sky dominated the upper half of the canvas. He'd paid detailed attention to the building's structure, the peeling paint of the back door, an upstairs shutter askew, the red slate formations of the roof. A few implements leaned against a wall, a rake and shovel, an upturned wheelbarrow, a short wooden ladder. Everything in this section of the painting could be depended upon. Ordinary people lived in this dwelling, they got up every day and used familiar tools to further their existence. They worked hard, but the tiny glow of light from the kitchen window implied a reward for their labour, a protective, communal warmth meant to invite the viewer in.

The sky so far was empty. No moon or stars or even clouds, just a grey-black swath above the chimney that stretched up and into the horizontal distance without break. He grunted as he realized Van Gogh's *Starry Night* was only brushstrokes away. Those luminous, expansive swirls of colour, the halo around a crescent moon, and the rolling currents of light that overrode the stillness of the town beneath, joining heaven to earth in startling redemptive fashion. He hadn't known until now what he might be after. Above one side of the house he placed a small star, the yellow-white combination set in a dab of Vincent's purple-blue. Then he created the vortex, if creation meant the materialization of such a disturbingly autonomous image.

Its outer curves were of the darkest hues he could ever remember using. He applied the oil in thick, aggressive layers that sucked in and swallowed the paler

shadings around them. The farmhouse shrank into the ground, the window light all but disappearing beneath the textured weight of blackness. By itself this spinning perimeter represented a fierce, predictable storm that would finally pass on. The house and all it stood for would rise up again, and the tools would be effective weapons against the damage done. It was the center of the whirlpool that denied such promise and mocked the affirmations of human construction.

He saw the unnatural light at its core before he moved his brush. It shone with a hungry pressure that would not release the farmhouse into triumph, opening into an indissoluble space that shook him with its intimations and threatened the painting itself. After a few moments, he realized it *was painting itself.* He had given up control, but that had happened before. Now, however, he had reached, or been taken to, a black heart of expression that held all individual creativity in its thrall and would kill it entirely in the end. He had felt inadequate on many occasions in his studio, but this was the first time he felt insignificant. With a shaking hand he signed his name in the bottom right-hand corner of the house's foundation. For a moment he imagined Annie's face in the window staring down the darkness, but the vision did not support him because he knew the darkness had claimed her long ago. What could he do against such finality? Katherine's last words to him were ringing in his ears as he put down his brush and backed away from the canvas.

*

Three days later, awaiting his visitor, he sat in a kitchen chair flicking through a book of Impressionist reproductions, marveling once more at the precision amidst the apparent blur. Birdsong outside the window was melodious and varied as sparrows and finches vied for branches and patches of sky. He

listened to them for several minutes before their music was interrupted by the crunching sound of gravel on his driveway. The book stayed open on a Sisley river scene as he put it down to watch his old friend carefully park his ancient Peugeot near the flagstone path leading to the front door. The doctor stepped towards the house, his suit rumpled as usual but still fitting his tall frame with style, his familiar fedora shadowing the blue-green specks in his eyes that glinted with interest whenever he and Sand conversed.

Aurelio Sanchez de Montigny, M.D. was the son of a French father and Catalan mother who had married just as Franco began his destructive march through Spain in 1936. He had been completing a residency under a specialist in Barcelona and she was a young law student who had been to the socialist barricades many times. As the war progressed and the republic's territory shrank, they saw the bleak inevitability of fascism's takeover of the country. Though loath to leave her family and the struggle, she fled with him across the border at Port Bou. Aurelio was born in Toulouse eight months later, where they had settled. As a result of his parents' history and ongoing activism, he grew up with a political savvy possessed by few of his boyhood friends and eventual medical colleagues, but after graduation and residency in Marseilles he was content to practice among farmers and townspeople for whom public authority and decision-making was vested in the local *gendarme* and mayor. For many years he had attended to Sand's minor aches and complaints, the most serious of which had been an inflamed nerve in one arm that prevented him from lifting and stretching canvases or raising his brush beyond mid-easel. Now, after his final diagnosis, the doctor would provide advice and, when needed, drugs to ease any pain, but more than that he would listen attentively to whatever his friend wanted to say and respond thoughtfully.

"*Bonjour*, Ben," he said, passing through the open door and switching to his excellent English. "How have you been?"

"Well enough, I suppose, though some of my thoughts have been rather morbid since I saw you last."

"I'm not surprised," the doctor replied, sitting down at the big oak table covered with newspapers and books. He ran his finger over the Sisley facsimile.

"How's Claudia? When does she arrive?"

Aurelio laughed. "Oh, next week sometime. If you ask me what day or time exactly, I can't say. She has to stop in Paris for a Master Class."

Claudia Hurst had recently retired from the Met where she had sung in leading roles for almost three decades. For the past ten years she spent part of each summer in the town, joining Aurelio regularly after they had become lovers in Paris where, as she proclaimed happily, he'd swept her off her feet following a performance of *La Bohême*. Sand was puzzled how his friend had been able to get backstage and proposition a star—that is, invite her out to dinner.

"I said I was a direct descendant of Puccini. Not to Claudia, but the security guard. And then I began to speak Italian very rapidly."

"I didn't know you spoke Italian."

"Just when it's necessary" was the cryptic reply.

"Why don't you two tie the knot and save some money?" Sand had asked the doctor this more than once, given Claudia's habit of renting a separate residence.

"You know she could never leave New York permanently, and as for me, well, what is it you North Americans say so fondly? 'You can't take the country out of the boy.' I've lived in small-town France since I began to practise medicine, and I'm too old to change. Besides, that New York crowd would be *troppo sofisticato* for me."

Now Aurelio became more serious. “You were about to tell me of your morbid thoughts.”

Sand set out their two ceramic mugs, filled the kettle with water, and shook some ground coffee into a filter. “Well, on a primal level it’s very simple, isn’t it? A matter of numbers. Twelve to eighteen months until mortality kicks in. Stark but simple.”

“You obviously know there’s more to it than that. The emotions that can’t be added up, for instance, though I’m certain they outnumber the thoughts. The matter of settling your estate. An estate which is really a legacy, of course.”

“You’re right about my emotions because I am bothered by what I have to leave behind.” He dribbled boiling water over the mound of coffee in the filter and watched the dark drops trickle into the glass pot.

“You have so much it’s a matter of organization, is it not? Art museums, galleries, and so on. You must have particular places in mind.”

“I do, though I haven’t really considered such decisions yet. Museums and galleries are only one part of what you call my legacy.”

The doctor sipped his coffee and took an old pipe from his pocket. He hadn’t smoked it for years but liked to puff, as he said, on imaginary tobacco that he could still smell. “Please continue.”

“Well, I’ve always had to paint, since I was in my twenties anyway. If it’s a talent, it’s also a compulsion.” He smiled. “My critics would say it’s just a bad habit, but I suppose somewhere inside I’ve felt it was my opposition to time’s passing and even to death. That after I was gone I’d leave something of consequence behind.”

“And now?”

"Now I'm not so sure. Knowing the date, however approximate, of my demise, I wonder how much the paintings matter. Not in themselves. I take great satisfaction from some of them in particular. And I don't dismiss the pleasure or provocation they might bring to others. What I mean is, it's not just *my* work that concerns me, but all that's been done in the tradition you and I know so well."

"Goya, Velasquez, Rembrandt, the Sistine Chapel? I shouldn't think you'd doubt their value. Their lasting moral and aesthetic value," Aurelio emphasized.

"Yes, that's there for as long as the world remains as we know it. But what about all the environmental disasters and wars we keep reading about? There's a good chance of a global calamity of one kind or another in the next century or two. What happens to paintings when there aren't any more museums or private collections? When the delicacy of a Vermeer or power of a Turner simply vanishes?" He lifted his mug leaving a circular ring of moisture on the countertop.

Aurelio puffed on his pipe methodically. "Will such questions matter then?"

"Yes, they'll matter. As long as there are people on this planet."

"Won't they be primarily interested in survival, given your apocalyptic scenario?"

Sand knew his friend was playing the devil's advocate. Nonetheless his questions were important. "Probably,' he replied, sipping his coffee, 'but at some point, if and when they've survived for a while, people will need to know about their cultural pasts. That's where art, great art, comes from. And great art nourishes as well as food and drink. You know this, Aurelio."

"Yes, I do. But given what you're suggesting, that nourishment might not be available."

"That's my point, so you can see how it affects how I'm feeling about my work and its worth. If it's all going to disappear, why bother?"

"Because you can't predict the future, Ben. Perhaps guardians of the great art you promote will find ways to protect it through the ages to come. Who knows, people may be viewing a Sand painting several millennia from now."

"Then they'll have to come up with ways to preserve whatever medium I've used. Remember, we've only been looking at paintings like mine for six or seven hundred years."

"And long before that there were the cave-painters. You've been to Lascaux.'

"The replica, and Font-de-Gaume, yes. The real cave-art will last, provided it's not defaced or too many tourists don't contaminate things with their microbes."

"It is a shame you're not religious. The Raphaels, Michelangelos, and others gave their paintings to God. And as for the predicted Apocalypse with a capital A, their work, like it, was just part of Heaven's plan."

"Did Goya give his paintings to God? Did Turner? Why did they keep going?"

"Perhaps because they didn't conceive of a disastrous end. I don't know. You're the artist. Why have you kept going?"

"I told you. Because it's in me and I've had no choice. But also to throw some obstacle in mortality's way that might be noticed by those who live on past me." He picked up their empty mugs and carried them over to the sink. "Let me show you something."

He took Aurelio into his studio where he had not often been before and led him to the painting on the easel. "There," he said, "what do you think?"

The doctor studied the work, tapping his pipe-stem on his teeth. Finally he said, "I didn't know this is how you saw things. Your illness has changed you quickly."

Sand paused before he replied, unsure of whether he should have revealed the vortex. "I didn't know either, Aurelio. But you're right. I did paint that sky because I'm going to die soon." He didn't mention the sky's unsettling self-sufficiency.

"This," the doctor said, pointing to the unnatural light at the center of the ominous eddy, "this says there is no future." Then he stepped back and declared, "Or it is a future to be overcome. Does it have a title?"

"No, you give it one."

Aurelio squeezed his hands together tightly, forgetting about the pipe he held. The bowl broke off from the stem with a sharp crack. "Damn! Look what your painting has made me do!" After a few moments he was calm again. "I'd call it *The Survivor*, he said, gently placing a finger on the tiny window glow.

That night Sand lay awake thinking about art and posterity. Unless you did give your canvas or words to God, your work was done in the face of oblivion as Shelley had suggested. You painted or wrote because while you were going to cease to exist your paintings or poems would outlive you.

Now, despite all his artistic barricades, he realized the painting Aurelio had bravely titled that afternoon portrayed death's successful invasion of his art. Where else had the expression of the vortex come from but within? And if that was so, he hadn't created the work because death was something waiting externally down a year-long road. It was a force already inside him that had infiltrated and shaped his expression for longer than he had realized, perhaps not directly but relentlessly nonetheless. He thought of Baudelaire's bird of madness grazing the poet with its wing-tips, and realized the tables had been turned on him as a painter. He had been consistently *brushed* by death that had only revealed its shadow as it passed over this particular canvas.

After the shock had worn off and the formalities of Annie's funeral were done, the weight of his anguish had dulled any tendency to panic, but now he sat up and turned on his bedside light, fighting to keep himself composed. It wasn't his own

death he feared but having created nothing with which to oppose its inexorable possession of the little girl he had so loved. The vortex only punctuated her loss. Surely there was a way painting could do more than simply emphasize, as Katherine had said, how absurdly small it was in comparison to such love? He got up and went to the kitchen where he poured himself a large tumbler of whiskey and drank it quickly down. A calm and dreamless sleep would bring a good start to the next day. But he sensed strangely, as he stared through the final swirl of liquid to the bottom of the glass, that the work on his easel was the last piece he would ever sign.

The next morning he drove into town and sat at his usual table in the square to enjoy a croissant with his coffee. The upper-floor windows of the buildings opposite stared down at him implacably until he shook his head and made them blink, chuckling at his illusory powers. Despite his disquieting recognitions of the previous night he felt surprisingly steady as if he had let go of a weight, a burden he had always borne alone but had been able to share, however indirectly, with Aurelio. The question was how to advance beyond the condition of mere survivor. At some point he'd be in a hurry, but for now he was content to move slowly. The funny thing was, despite the revelation at the bottom of the whiskey glass, he never thought he wouldn't paint again.

When Aurelio had first introduced him to Claudia, her international reputation as a great soprano had preceded her. For thirty years she had been a powerhouse at the Met and opera houses around the world, and as she had aged gracefully her voice and beauty had allowed her to assume the parts of heroines much younger than herself, like Mimi, well past the usually reserved time. In her mid-fifties, she had left the stage behind and now taught international students in New York for

most of the year. Sand had heard her live only once when they were both young, but since her arrival in the town had acquired nearly all her recordings. His favourite was her stunning portrayal of the Marschallin in Strauss's rather silly story about the older woman and the younger man, a tale complicated by his having written the male role for a soprano.

Twice-divorced, she was inevitably followed to Europe by would-be producers ostensibly trying to lure her back to the stage or by wealthy, middle-aged admirers whose romantic persuasions she always managed to refuse, undoubtedly because of Aurelio. She had a grown son and daughter with children of their own whose pictures she proudly displayed in her house, but Sand had never seen any point in telling her or the doctor about his own family history. He'd tried to give the impression that he'd left any emotional complications behind him when he settled permanently in Europe, but he sensed they simply respected his silence by not probing his Canadian past. Though he was very close to them as a couple, Sand often met Claudia separately for lunch or coffee at her house. As Aurelio once put it before immediately changing his metaphor, they had to till creative ground together.

"Actually, I'm the ploughman from Breughel's painting with my feet on the ground," he had added with a smile. "You two are more like Icarus, flying high above the rest of us, inspired and..."

Claudia interrupted him, laughing gently. "Inspired and foolish, you should say. Look how Breughel portrays him with his feet sticking out of the sea."

"Ah, my dear, artists must always fly too close to the sun. That is what they were born to do."

Sand had been listening lazily to their banter, but now, unexpectedly, he thought again of those lost moments with Annie in the water who hadn't had the

chance to fly and how his own heels must have bobbed above the surface as he lay there dazed and helpless. When Aurelio looked to him for a comment he kept things on an even keel by emphasizing Breughel's mastery of perspective and technique.

Claudia's operatic greatness was indisputable, but he had always been troubled by the brevity of a singer's life at the top. She could have continued at the Met for another decade while the starring roles diminished and the upper registers of her voice became less and less attainable, whatever her audience's best wishes. He supposed opera singers, especially divas, always knew they couldn't keep going until their hearts gave out, and that awareness would lessen the impact of not being able to work at the highest level well before the real deathbed scene. He couldn't imagine what it would have been like if, when he'd been fifty, he'd lost his arms or developed the damning arthritis Aurelio had playfully warned him about. For that was the only valid comparison. No one had told Claudia directly her time was up, but an unwritten rule had been invoked that simply said she couldn't perform any more the way she always had. If a similar rule had been applied to his painting—'Mr. Sand, it's over; we don't want anything new from you'—he wouldn't have stopped working. And in the past two decades he knew he had only gotten better. Now his illness made him more like the singer. Within a year or so all his memorable endeavours would be in the past. She phoned him, as she always did on her return, and they agreed to meet for lunch at her place later in the week.

"Ben," she exclaimed cheerfully, pecking him on both cheeks, a custom as established in New York cultural circles as it was embedded in French society. But when she stood back to look him over, her good spirits were shaken. "You've lost weight," she said. "Are you okay?"

Aurelio had obviously kept doctor-patient confidentiality, knowing Sand would want to break the news himself.

What could he say? 'I've got death on my mind. In fact, it's always been there'? Not yet, if ever. Instead he laughed. "I'm alright, really. Doing a lot of walking," he added by way of reassurance.

In faded jeans and pale blue blouse, with only traces of grey in her light blonde hair curling at her shoulders, Claudia herself looked fit and ready enough for a performance of the entire *Ring Cycle*, an opera in which she had never appeared because, as she had told him wryly, "I've got the stamina, just not the Teutonic grace." Sand would have given anything to hear her sing the role of Isolde with any suitable tenor. Now he watched her lively figure move confidently across the room as she headed for the kitchen to make some coffee. He would eventually tell her he was sick, but not just yet. The questions he had for her this afternoon he needed to ask free of pressing circumstance.

"Are you working as well as exercising?" she called as kitchen cupboards opened and closed, but there was too much din for him to reply. "Or should I say, are you working well?" she asked a few minutes later when she returned to place a wooden tray with cups, saucers, and carafe on the table between their chairs.

"Yes and no," I suppose.

"Go on," she replied, very much as Aurelio had when asking him to explain the complexities of his legacy.

"I've got something on my easel that I'm not ready to come to terms with. I'll tell you why eventually, but not now. Now I'd rather hear your news and then pick your brain a little."

She bent to pour the coffee. "I'll submit to the picking as long as I can give you a synopsis of the last ten months. Some of it will be a repetition anyway because I

did send you at least two letters, one before Christmas, and one early in the spring, and I'm sure Aurelio has filled in any gaps. So you know I broke my arm when I fell on the ice during a benefit at the Rockefeller Centre rink. I hadn't been on skates since my twenties and stupidly agreed to do a few turns on the arm of the Olympic champion. He let go and gave me a little turn at the end, and down I went. The embarrassing picture in *The Times* didn't help. Neither did his making a pass at me when I came back in a cast to the reception."

"Don't worry, Aurelio protected your sporting reputation because I knew nothing about the picture or I would have ordered *The Times* from Toulouse," he said teasingly. "As for the young Olympian, I'm sure you declined his attentions very diplomatically."

"Yes, one triple lutz and I was free and clear." She was blushing, but he suspected it was at the athletic prowess she had conjured.

"Meanwhile, how about your teaching?"

"It's going very well. I have two or three top students, and one girl…" She kissed her joined fingers and thumb and spread them wide in a flamboyant gesture of approval. "She will definitely go all the way. The others, maybe."

"Do you miss it, Claudia?" He'd never asked her this before, and he didn't want her to feel pushed in any way. "When you see and hear…"

She had raised her cup to her lips but placed in back in the saucer without drinking. "My replacements, you mean?" At first she turned toward the window and its view of the river, pressing her hair back on either side of her head as if she were about to pin it up. "It's getting too long," she stated absently, then, turning to him and smiling, she said, "To quote the famous Ben Sand, 'yes and no.'"

"This is where I get to say 'Go on.'"

"No, I don't miss the endless hours of rehearsal, not to mention the demands of my colleagues—it isn't all sweetness and light, you know, whatever the public relations efforts. "I don't miss getting older under the glare either, standing beside a willowy mezzo who reaches for a high C like she's turning on a light switch."

"And the 'yes'?"

"The rush, Ben. The way the adrenaline kicks in as the curtain goes up, that feeling as you get deeper into the role that you're not just singing words but crying out a kind of hosanna in the highest tier of *your* house. You must know what I'm talking about."

"I know what you're talking about because I can imagine you singing that way. But I don't think it's the same for a painter."

"Why?"

"Because I'm alone when I work. In contrast to your crowd-filled house there's no one with me in the studio, unless I'm doing a portrait. Most of the time I'm completely lost in what I'm doing. There's no difference between me and the role of the painter others might see if they peeked through a window. If I made a mark and felt of it as a hosanna, I'd botch it." He laughed uneasily. "I've said too much."

Then she surprised him by taking their exchange to the place he hadn't wanted to go so quickly.

"Do you ever wish you could paint forever? Until your last breath, I mean."

"I've always assumed I could do that," he said, deliberately avoiding any time frame. "Maybe you should have asked if I wished I could paint forever at the top of my form."

"You're right. But there's an even greater difference between the singer and the painter than you described." Before he could interject, she continued. "Chances are

you *will* paint at the top of your form until you die. Look at Picasso, or even de Kooning who had Alzheimer's. You can go out with a brush in your hand."

"Many would say Picasso's best work was in the twenties and thirties, not the fifties and sixties. As for Bill, I last saw him when he could still recognize me. Those thin-air spaces in his final paintings are quite fine, but I much prefer the canvases of the early fifties."

It had grown darker outside, and Claudia switched on a lamp. They sat quietly for a while.. "Would you like a drink, Ben?" he heard her say eventually. When he nodded she went over to the teak cabinet and poured herself a glass of wine and him a neat whiskey. He joined her there and took the tumbler from her.

"I've learned the benefits of a little water," he said and disappeared into the kitchen for a moment.

When they had sat down again, he posed the question that had been there for him all along. "Do the differences between us as artists make any difference in what our art is worth in the end?"

"Worth?"

"Yes, in the face of the end? Your greatness has been recorded and your arias will transcend your death. Perhaps a few of my paintings will do the same for me. What does it matter when in your life you sang or when in mine I painted?" His voice rose a little. "Isn't the question, how long will the recordings and paintings last—I mean physically so someone millennia from now has the chance to hear or see them?"

Taking a large gulp of her wine, she set down her glass. "What's wrong, Ben?"

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Claudia. It wasn't what I came to talk about."

She looked at him closely and her eyes told him that she knew. “Yes, it was. That’s all we’ve been talking about, isn’t it?” She reached for his hand. “Tell me,” she said.

Very early the following morning he drove north to Font-de-Gaume. If Aurelio or Claudia had asked him why, he couldn’t have said exactly. He sensed the cave-paintings were bound up with the questions he’d been asking himself and his two friends about art and human transience. If they were bound up with Annie as well and her presence in his painted window where Aurelio had placed his finger, he had no idealistic thoughts of finding any firm answers on the ceilings and walls deep beneath the Dordogne earth. And it was beneath that earth he knew he had to go, not to the replica at Lascaux. So he kept driving the A20 for an hour past the turnoff to the more famous site until he saw the signs for Souillac and the smaller roads to the east.

Les Eyzies-de-Tyac was a village on the Vezère River, set at the foot of a steep hillside capped by a formidable limestone buttress housing the famous cave. Buildings lined the river or clung to the side of the escarpment like multi-hued pictures on a gallery wall. Font-de-Gaume had been discovered by a local schoolteacher in 1901 and opened to the public not long after. For many years visitors had free access, but now there was a government guide who held the key to an iron door covering the entrance. Normally in the high summer months you had to sign up for a tour, but at this time of the day the crowds hadn’t gathered. Still, no one could enter the cave without the guide leading the way.

Sand and several others followed the man along a metal grille walkway through a narrow passage for perhaps fifty or sixty meters before they stopped. The grille protected the absorbent cave floor from the algae brought in on the soles of shoes,

which was the reason the original Lascaux had been closed to the public soon after it was discovered in 1946. He wondered why Font-de-Gaume hadn't suffered the same fate, but was grateful he could still feel the damp and watch the water dripping from the end of stalactites as it had done from their nubs twenty thousand years ago.

He thought he was prepared for what he now saw, but on his previous visit he had been interested purely in technique: the way in which paint had been made from grinding coloured minerals into a water base sometimes mixed with blood, saliva, or citrus juices; the black obtained from manganese dioxide and charcoal and the red from iron oxide. Artists drew their images on the stone with sticks of charcoal or brushed them on with bound animal hairs and, occasionally, clumps of fur or moss. They also blew paint from their mouths to capture the outline of their hands or the initial shapes of various animals. He had been fascinated by the accuracy and detail of their depictions—the horses, bison, and mammoths that proliferated across the surface of the walls, their forms amplified by carefully chosen bulges in the rock that stressed rippling shoulder muscles and tense, bending haunches. There was perfection in the portrait of the male and female reindeer facing one another, she kneeling before the strength of his upswept antlers, his gentleness evident as he tenderly licked her forehead. He had seen these creatures and the herd of bison in the room at the end of the passageway with his artist's eye, the bison painted as if emerging from a fissure that gave birth to their intermingling, spinning contours via the hands of a consummate draftsman.

Of course, there was likely more than one painter at work at a time, a Paleolithic Gauguin beside a Van Gogh, both so good at what they did there was no telling where one's animal began and the other's left off. When he returned to his studio after that initial visit, he focused intently on laying down lines and

minimalist displays of colour in abstract combinations similar to those late de Koonings he'd mentioned to Claudia. He put these musings away in his stockpile but marvelled at the connections between then and now, aware that the essence of painting, perhaps like that of religion, hadn't changed very much in twenty millennia.

Now he saw things differently. The technique hadn't faded. If anything, he marvelled even more at the deftness of the strokes. But he was also engulfed by the love—there was no other appropriate word— that the artist or artists had for the creatures depicted. This feeling was inherent in their absolute attention to the strength of the charging bison and to their suffering from the spears of the invisible hunters. It was revealed in the eyes of the giant mammoths that seemed to foresee their own ultimate disappearance and offered their images as testimony against the dying light. Love was there, he realized, because the animals had been painted to last twenty thousand years, which was perhaps the best explanation as to why they had been placed underground safe from erosion and vandals. Apparently, individual posterity wasn't at stake as it was so much today, but rather the insistence, amid the shockingly brief spans of human lives, that what was seen and wanted to be seen could last as long as the rocks themselves. He wished Katherine were here to see how *this* canvas enlarged rather than shrank the convergence of painting with human existence. On the drive home he wondered if the eyes of the girl in his portrait were seeing such an expansive union and what form it would take for her.

They didn't leave any names," he said to Aurelio as the two of them sat in the doctor's garden, surrounded by a profusion of red and yellow flowers and the buzz of insects attending to the blooms.

“They had names, I’m sure, in one form or another.” Aurelio swatted away a bee that was more interested in the sugary aroma of their coffee than in working for any nectar.

“Yes, but that’s not what I mean. They didn’t sign their paintings.”

“Why does that bother you?”

“It’s just hard for me to believe that anyone who could see aspects of the world as intently and passionately as they did wouldn’t have a developed concept of themselves—who they were in relation to one another, who they were in relation to their paintings.”

“Perhaps they just didn’t have our romantic egos.”

Sand thought this over for a few moments. “You could be right. And if you are, what’s left is an incredible conviction that art itself is what matters, not the creative process we give so much weight to nowadays or our insistence on the value of personal experience.” He stirred his coffee, staring intently at the swirl. “But…”

“But what?”

“But they had daily lives just like we do, family, friends, enemies. They saw the clouds bring in the weather and felt afraid or watched the sun disappear over the horizon and felt lonely. Why didn’t they paint that as well?”

“That would have been a kind of signature, you mean.”

“Yes, exactly. As things are, they left only the animals. We surmise about the rest.”

The doctor smiled. “Wouldn’t it be enough if we had only the Sistine Chapel ceiling and nothing else—no knowledge of Michelangelo or the Pope of the day who sponsored him, just the fingers of Adam and God?”

“I don’t think we’d be satisfied. Art by itself isn’t enough for us these days. People want a context.”

"Do you need a context when you're painting?"

"Not consciously. But I do sign my name in the end. I do say the work is mine."

"And long after Ben Sand has vanished and your name means nothing at all? Only the paintings will remain then, like that one you showed me the other day. Isn't that what you want to leave behind ultimately, not any direct statement about your identity?"

"I guess so, but in the here and now I don't paint anonymously, nor do I want to. If the paintings last a few hundred years on someone's wall, my name will at least say an individual life was involved."

"Do you know what I think, my friend? I think those Paleolithic artists do away with the 'great man' concept." The doctor gave an embarrassed laugh. "Why do we assume it's only men who did those paintings? Anyway, that's what bothers us most. Our greatest expression as human beings comes closest to God, not ourselves."

"Oh, the God thing again. I wondered why you chose the Sistine Chapel as your example."

Aurelio appeared hurt by his dismissive tone, but put up his hand when Sand started to apologize. "Ben, I don't presume to know why you paint, but I do know when people look at your paintings they are transported by them, taken out of those daily lives you insist are a signature, to some other level that might be called the spiritual."

"And so?"

"So as the artist you matter to some degree, and they're grateful to you, but finally you're just a kind of tool. Only the paintings matter."

Now it was Sand's turn to laugh. "Sorry," he said, "it's just that I can imagine the two of us talking this way twenty thousand years ago. I'm about to put my

name below my bison when you come into the cave and convince me it's best if the animal goes into the future alone." He didn't tell his friend about his thoughts of never signing another painting, or about Annie's personal scrawl in the corner of her rock-drawing, though these weren't far beneath the surface of their exchange.

They left the garden for a walk in the afternoon sun and ended up by the school athletic field. A soccer ball escaped from a crowd of kids and Aurelio returned it to them nimbly, but not before bouncing it off his knee and head.

"Not bad at all," Sand said. "I'll bet you could wade in and score a goal or two. That is, before your legs gave out."

"Quite true on both counts. I ran around a lot when I was young, but those days are long over. You must have played sports as a boy."

"Hey, I'm Canadian, aren't I? Born and raised on skates like the rest of my countrymen." He thought of Claudia and her Olympic champion. "I wouldn't want to bounce a puck off my head, but I could probably still put one behind that goalie over there."

"Let's see," Aurelio said. "What game have we shared?"

"Well, certainly not baseball or American football. I know, how about tennis?"

"Good, but have you been on a clay court?"

"You mean those rusty surfaces that kick up dust in your eyes? No, I've only seen them on television. But I did play quite a bit of tennis when I was younger. You did, too, I take it."

"Yes, and it's the only reason I wouldn't mind a television set at home, so I could watch some matches from Madrid and Barcelona.

"The great Nadal, you mean."

"Of course, him and Federer. You of all people will appreciate they are both great artists. Different kinds perhaps, but equally skilled just the same."

Sand nodded in agreement. “From all reports, Federer is the Picasso of the game, adapting to any circumstance and able to meet any style with his own unique response.”

“And Nadal?”

“Oh, he plays with *duende* like Goya would.”

The ball came toward them again. This time Aurelio stood aside and watched his friend arc it toward the net.

3. The Third of May, 1808

In terms of size the Goya was the mammoth of his project. Alone, it would dominate one wall with its weighted collusion of levelled guns and bloody slaughter-ground. But the final, haunting gesture of the man in white lifted the dark veil for the viewing eye.

*

"Look! Look José, Miguel, see what he's done!" Pepé always had the loudest voice.

Manolo held the stick in his left hand above the square patch of dirt. He was right-handed when he wrote his letters in school, used a fork or spoon, or held the sword in mock bull-fights with his friends, so he wondered why he had drawn the French soldier with his left. There in the red clay of Spain was the hated enemy in

his high boots, long jacket, and tall feathered cap they called a *shako*. He'd seen the soldiers in the nearby town, of course, so the uniform details were familiar, but he'd never thought to make a picture. It just came to him, that's all. He'd been playing with his friends and had looked down at a smooth square of earth that he stepped over deliberately as he passed the ball with a deft flick of his bare foot. His momentum carried him on a few steps, then he turned back to the square as the game carried forward without him. The other boys didn't notice his absence at first, but soon ran over to where he was crouching with the short stick he'd found.

"What is it?" José had shouted excitedly, expecting a lizard or snake they could torture. Then he had stopped and cried out at Manolo's accomplishment.

"You didn't do that," Miguel said quietly. "You found it there."

"How could he do that?" Pepé replied. "We've been playing here for half an hour. Nobody else saw the picture, did they? And besides, our feet would have stomped it out."

"I'll do it now," Miguel declared, lifting his leg above the soldier.

But Manolo grabbed it before he could slam it down. "No," he said. "I haven't finished."

He drew a rifle with fixed bayonet hung by a sling over one shoulder. The blade pointed into the sky like a church spire.

"That's a Frenchy, alright," Miguel said. He spit on the soldier's boots.

"It will disappear with the first rain, Manolo," Pepé declared, pointing at Miguel, "if this idiot doesn't destroy it first. You should do it on paper. Senora Consuela will give you a crayon tomorrow."

Consuela Hernandez was the village school-teacher, and when the boys, even Miguel, crowded around her the next morning and shouted that Manolo was a great

artist and she should give him a crayon to prove it, she laughed and told them to wait until the noon bell.

"Manuel can draw then. Right now you must learn your history of Spain." Consuela was from a village not much larger than this one, and she knew how hard the boys and girls would have to struggle to make their ways in life. First they had to know who they were, and if, for her safety's sake and theirs, she never said anything unpleasant about the French occupiers, she did quietly praise things Spanish, especially the King who had recently lost his beautiful, young wife. So she was not about to discourage any student talent, even if, in this case, she did not expect it to amount to much. Manuel was a bright boy who read his letters clearly and correctly for the most part, but, like his friends, he had not distinguished himself in any special way.

After the noon bell had rung and the children had eaten their simple fare in the shade of the adobe building—a piece of day-old bread, perhaps an apple or small bit of cheese, washed down by cool water from the nearby well—she announced that Manuel could now show them all what he could do. In the schoolroom, she spread a piece of paper on her table and gave him a charcoal crayon, one of only three she was allowed for the entire term. Never mind, she'd watch the boy carefully, and as soon as he'd done his stick figures or whatever dabbling he had in mind, she'd take the crayon back and stow it securely in the cupboard away from grasping hands.

Manolo paused above the paper. What he'd drawn in the dirt had been on the spur-of-the-moment. The scrap of earth had been there along with the stick, and the soldier had just appeared from his left hand. Senora Consuelo noticed how he was holding the crayon and gave a little gasp as he began to draw. The left was the devil's hand, *siniestro*, and, with the approval of the priests, was tied behind the

backs of children who favoured it when they wrote. But her concern for Manuel's spiritual well-being gave way to astonishment as she saw the outline of a figure emerge and then the features of his face and apparel. The French soldier stared arrogantly at her from beneath his tall hat. Where had the boy learned to do this?

All Manolo knew was that the crayon gave him a freedom to make delicate strokes that the stick did not. He smudged the black lines of the hat with his thumb and the knee-high boots as well to give them a weight he sensed they needed. The figure in the dirt had been in profile and standing still, but this one was stepping toward whoever was looking at him, so he made several short light strokes behind his heel as if the air had been stirred by his motion.

His friends clapped and yelled. "See! We told you, senora. Do another one, Manolo. Do Napoleon!"

"Yes, yes, Napoleon!" the rest of the class shouted.

"Hush, children!" Senora Consuelo held up her hands in consternation. Things were getting out of hand. The French tolerated no threat to their occupation of the country. She had heard of officials in towns and cities who were shot for speaking out. The priests were urging calm and warning their parishioners of the dangers of resistance. God would protect them, but they must leave matters in His hands. Now there was this boy drawing what might well be seen as an affront to authority. They would not harm him, of course, but she, she would be held responsible. Best to let things go no further. She reached down and picked up the drawing. Doubling it over, she put it in her apron pocket. "It's very good, Manolo," she said, "but the Emperor can afford real painters to do his portrait. As for our lowly French soldier, I think this should be his only appearance. Draw something else for us, a flower perhaps, or the plane tree in the schoolyard there."

She spread another piece of paper on the table. "Go on, then."

The class was quiet now, subdued by her pronouncement about the Emperor's power. Manolo had not turned around to see her fold his drawing, but he drew himself bent over the table with her standing stiffly behind him, the paper not folded but crumpled in her hand. Reflexively she put her hand in her pocket and crushed the soldier into a tight ball.

His father, Juan, was a sheepherder who spent the warm months with the flock on the mountain slopes of Burgos. When there was no school, Manolo would live in a large hut with his father and several other men and boys who ate beans from a pot that was always simmering above the fire and drank ice-cold water from a nearby spring with their cupped hands. But the time for meals was short and that for sleep not much more. Their shared watch over the flock took up nearly all the hours of the day and night. Fiercely-loyal sheepdogs made wolves and wildcats nervous but not enough to keep them entirely at bay. Nearly every morning, despite the vigilance, the remains of a bloody adult sheep would be found among the rocks. The corpses of lambs would disappear entirely, having been dragged off into gullies or caves.

When the weather turned cold, Juan and the other men made preparations for the great trek south to Andalusia where their animals would graze with thousands of others in the foothills of the Sierra Morena. The weeks-long journey each November was very demanding, and because of his youth and school it was agreed between his mother and father that Manolo would not go along until he was fourteen. In the spring before this momentous birthday, however, they said he could meet the north-bound flock on the far southern outskirts of Madrid before the cobblestones of the city were covered in a moving sea of white wool.

In February 1808, the invading French troops had captured much of the north of the country, including Barcelona, and headed for the capital. News of the army's advance reached the village slowly, but even by mid-April there was no report of any dangers on the road for law-abiding citizens. What would Napoleon's troops gain by bothering simple sheepherders going about their business? Manolo traveled south with old Andrès who, despite his seventy years, lined face, and bony frame, could still outlast many of the younger men on the trail. He wasn't stronger or faster than them, Manolo saw, just more determined in the end.

Following dirt roads and sleeping in haystacks and abandoned barns, they reached the northern edge of Madrid at the end of the month to find the French in occupation of the city. Individual soldiers in black and gray uniforms stood in high-vaulted doorways or gathered in bands on street-corners to watch everyone who walked by. Manolo was disturbed by their stern stares and overwhelmed by the buzzing noise of the crowds, the size of the buildings, and the endless tunnels of streets that ran off in all directions. When he and Andrès finally came to the Puerto del Sol in the centre of the city there were more people gathered there than the countless sheep in the Burgos flocks, and the houses and churches were so tall and wide that even a few of them together could have contained his entire village. The huge crowd in the square was shouting things about the King he didn't understand, and he saw many angry faces. Andrès led him on to a poorer neighbourhood where he took enough coins from his leather pouch to pay for two pallets in a stable loft. From here they could look out over the rooftops to the south and see the plains that would soon be filled with sheep.

"They will camp out there and rest before they enter the city," Andrès told him. "It is very hard on the animals and the men because they set off at dark and it takes them all night to push through. They must be beyond the northern wall before the

cock crows. That is the law. Any sheep still on the streets after dawn are the property of those who can tie them down or kill them. Many linger with ropes and knives hoping for stragglers. There have even been deaths because hungry men and women have not waited for the sun. Your father will be at the head of the flock. You must stay by me in the rear and help drive the animals forward. Do not let them run down any alleys, but if one or two do that, let them go. Their sacrifice will let the others survive."

Manolo was excited and a bit afraid. He wanted to behave as a man would and keep all the sheep on a straight and narrow path through the streets, but the unsmiling French soldiers and the angry citizens bothered him. The sheep became skittish if everything didn't go as usual for them. He'd seen their panic in a thunderstorm when a lightning bolt felled a tree and how they ran uncontrollably from a wolf pack that got between them and the men. That was why they were taken through the city in the dark hours. His father said once that if he could blindfold them all, he would. Surely those people who had made all the noise in the main square had to sleep and there would be only a few soldiers on guard duty during the night. Lying on his pallet he pictured the peaceful slopes of Burgos in summer and the sheep grazing there, but as he drifted off this image was replaced by his drawing of the French soldier with his gun. He tried to crush it as Senora Consuelo had done, but his mind was not as strong as her hands.

On the second afternoon thy heard much gunfire from one direction and saw the rolling waves of sheep approaching from the other. They walked through the wide southern gate of the city out onto the plain and eventually met Juan and the other herders by a river bank. Juan smiled at his son who was relieved his father didn't show more affection in front of the men. The sheep pushed and prodded one another as they milled about in the shallows.

"The French are in the city," Andrès said. "They have gotten rid of the King. There were many rifle shots two hours ago."

Manolo knew the old man had gone to a nearby tavern for some wine and conversation after he had supposedly fallen asleep, but he was surprised by this news. When they had heard the guns Andrès had said nothing about the King.

"The sheep cannot wait," Juan said. "We must take them through tonight."

Some men expressed their disagreement, saying it would be better to remain by the river until things settled down.

"Nothing will settle down," Juan said. "If the King has gone, the unhappiness will stay in the streets for a long time."

After much arguing, it was decided that Juan and two other herders, along with Andrès and Manolo, would try to take a few hundred through that night. Then one of them would come back and tell the others of the situation.

As they sat by the fire waiting for dark, they could hear more gunfire from the city. "Will the French shoot at us?" he asked his father.

"No," Juan replied. "They will know we just want to take the sheep home. They will let us alone."

"Are you angry about the King?"

"I am sad about the King, Manolo, but Spain will go on until he returns." Juan looked up at the winking stars. "Or another takes his place."

A few hours later when they came to the gate, they were challenged by the French guard. Through an unhappy-looking interpreter who kept his head down, the sergeant told them they couldn't pass.

"We sell these animals in the city," Juan said. "Your companions there will need mutton and lamb stew, won't they?"

While it was true that butchers bought sheep for slaughter and hauled them away in wagons, they always did so before the drive through the streets began and therefore had already visited the riverbank. It was fortunate this sergeant and his men had not been on duty when the wagons had rumbled past the gate that morning.

"Alright," the Frenchman said, "but we'll have one of them now and without charge."

"That's fine. Make your choice."

Selecting a large ewe, the sergeant ordered his men to haul her away from her two suckling lambs who began to bleat loudly. "Looks like they want to come with their mama," he said, laughing.

"No," Juan told him. "We'll find other milk for them."

"Be careful in there, *mon ami*. Your countrymen aren't behaving like sheep and they're paying a price for it."

The interpreter shifted his position slightly as he spoke and, looking down, Manolo saw his feet were hobbled.

Holding up a torch, Juan led the way. The two herders, carrying lanterns, took up positions on either side of the flock while he and Andrès brought up the rear, the old man brandishing a long crook and Manolo lifting high his own torch. For a while everything was quiet. They passed the occasional shadowy figure hugging the building walls but saw no soldiers or groups of Spaniards. Manolo had heard many times about the traditional route along the Calle Mayor through the Puerto del Sol and on to the northern gate, and he knew his father and the others wouldn't turn from it despite the sergeant's warning. The constant baa-ing and the soft shuffling sound of their sandals on the cobbles calmed his worries about any danger, and for over an hour he plodded along dreamily beside Andrès, awake only

to stragglers and those animals that strayed from the confined order of the march. But when the sheep burst into the huge square where the angry crowd had stirred two days before, they smelled the blood and began to run.

Manolo caught sight of bodies in the dim light beyond the torch glow, limbs twisted and bent as if they were puppets whose strings had suddenly been cut. But he had no time to react to such horror because he saw the sheep break from their line and pour across the square, hiding everything on the ground beneath their terrified rush. He heard his father cry out far ahead and watched one of the herders fall under the stampede. Andrès yelled, “Go that way” and flung his arm out to the right. As the old man started to run toward the other side of the square to try to turn the flock, Manolo stumbled over a bloody corpse and fell heavily to the stones, rolling without check through an uproar of bleating and shouting until his head clipped a metal post and the noise ceased.

When he woke in the morning light the square was filled with the wails of women and the rough tones of French soldiers speaking to one another in their own language. He watched the women bend over bodies and cover their faces with their shawls, moaning and calling out to God. The soldiers paid them no attention but wandered idly past the dead, occasionally poking some remains with a bayonet or reaching down to retrieve a colourful bandana. Raising himself to his knees he tried to stand and felt a bolt of pain ram through his skull as if someone had hit him with a hammer. He sat down abruptly and leaned against the post. A few feet away a young woman was lying on her back staring at the sky, blood and bits of entrail smearing her exposed belly. Beside her, sprawled an older man with no visible wound, and past him knelt a boy, no bigger than himself, his face pressed into the cobbles and the top of his head blown away. Each of them was very real to him, but he did not understand why they were here. He did not understand why he was

in this place either. Trying to think about that, he stared dully at the ground. A trail of ants made their way past his sandal, across the stones, and up the skirt-folds of the young woman. Hordes of them disappeared into her red wound and he wondered how she could hold so many. A crow hopped onto the shoulders of the kneeling boy and began to pick at his skull. The sun was very hot and he was thirsty. His tongue felt swollen as he swallowed a bit of saliva, and he knew he must find some water and a piece of shade. I will go, he thought, but didn't move. "I will go now," a voice said aloud, and he didn't know who was speaking. Then the sun went away.

"He does not know who he is," the nun said.

"Does he remember anything?" the priest asked.

"He says nothing at all. Only his name, 'I am Manolo.' His accent is not *Madrilenos*. From the north, I think. There was nothing in his pocket but this." She held up a bit of charcoal crayon.

"Give him some paper. See if he will write something."

When his eyes opened it was dark. The square was silent except for an urgent whispering sound he didn't recognize. His head throbbed when he managed to stand, and as he took a few staggering steps the strange murmur ceased for a moment then began again more insistently. He felt a tugging on his trouser leg and a weight on the top of his foot, and crouching slowly so as not to tip his head he put out his hands in the darkness and felt a sharp nip of teeth on his fingertips and knuckles. Then the moon came out from behind a cloud and he saw the rats feeding on the body of a young woman.

At the edge of the square was a small fountain where he drank greedily and held his head for a long time beneath the cold stream. Feeling a little stronger he followed a wide street toward the sound of loud voices and flickering light. Figures brushed by him in the same direction and as he moved uphill he could see groups of men standing quietly in doorways of buildings as if waiting for a signal of some kind before they moved with him or turned back toward the square. The loud voices ahead spoke angrily in French. Between the words he could hear groans and cries that needed no translation.

Eventually he came to an open space at the top of the hill where many people stood facing a large wall of rock higher than his head and as wide as the church he could see beyond it. He circled this crowd as a volley of gunfire crashed against his ears, and he could see grey-uniformed soldiers wearing flat-topped, black hats, their guns raised and pointing at several men pressed back against the wall. Bloody bodies were piled at the feet of these men, and at first he didn't connect the volley with the fallen or with those who stood just a few feet from the shining tips of the long knives attached to the rifle barrels. He could see all this because of a huge lantern box placed between the soldiers and the others, its glow lighting up the red earth and the forms of those who clung to one another or buried their faces in their hands. One man in a white shirt stood slightly apart, a silver cross gleaming at his neck, his eyes searching the crowd desperately as if to gather in everything around him in his final moments. Instinctively, without knowing why, the boy took a step forward.

"I am Manolo," he suddenly said, as if the figure in white had asked him who he was, though he didn't know why this name had come to his lips or why the man would question him. But between the steady thumps in his head were flashes of grassy slopes covered with white animals and a hut where this same man stirred a

steaming pot, smiling as he turned and held out a wooden spoon piled high with beans.

"Where was he found?" the priest asked later.

"Near the rock where so many were shot," the nun replied. "It is clear he witnessed the slaughter."

"I warned them not to resist, but they would not listen. Instead they all cried '*Viva l'Espana!*' before they were mowed down like the wheat at harvest time. Now the French will have this on their souls."

"We shall keep him here. Perhaps he will remember eventually. Perhaps someone will come looking for him."

"Yes," said the priest, holding up the pages of drawings. "He has a God-blessed talent."

That evening the nun included the boy in her prayers. He called himself Manolo, but when he did it was as if someone else was speaking. She thought of what he had done with the stub of crayon. It was unforgettable and, despite the problem she had not mentioned to the priest, almost holy. The next morning after breakfast she gave him a new crayon. Over and over again she watched him draw:

A sword with curving blade sheathed in a scabbard and rectangular hilt burnished with wear.

A lantern box glowing with the flames of hidden candles.

A man's foot and leg encased in boot and gaiter, bent at the knee beneath insufferable weight.

The tonsured head of a mendicant lowered in agony or prayer.

Fingers and thumb of a hand spread wide—reaching, grasping, measuring, perhaps all three.

A cathedral spire like an extra finger.

A white v-necked shirt with silver cross balanced between borders of a finely-stitched hem.

A patch of earth flowing with rivulets, streams, oceans of blood.

Chimney pots on a distant rooftop like witnesses smoking to pass the time.

A fringed red sash waiting for a waist.

The whites of eyes downcast, uplifted.

A fixed bayonet and flare of powder flash.

Shadows everywhere.

He did all this with a single crayon, but she saw the colours anyway as if the black stick held a spectrum of them all.

"He is obsessed," the priest said.

"There is something else."

"Yes, sister?"

"He draws with his left hand."

The priest crossed himself. "I will ask the Bishop for his advice."

When he returned a few days later he gave instructions with an authority she could not question.

"You must tie the offending hand behind his back. The bishop feels if God still wants him to make pictures, he will do so properly."

She did as she was told, but at first only when the boy sat at the table with the blank white page in front of him. He did not lift the crayon and would not hold it when she tried to place it between his fingers. After days of such refusal she tied him as instructed through all his waking hours in hopes that the right hand he used to eat and drink, and now awkwardly do his chores, like sweeping out the chapel or piling small pieces of firewood, would take over completely. Once she saw him lying with closed eyes on his straw mattress, his *siniestro* limb sketching the air above him, sword and sash and shadows, and all the other scraps from his unspoken past limned there in invisible grace. One morning she refused to tie him.

Old Andrès found the bodies of Juan and the two herders at the base of the rock along with many others left there for relatives or hungry dogs to claim. The night before he had tried to turn the flock, but the sheep were too quick in their panic and by the time he started his run many had already disappeared into the innumerable streets and alleys branching off from the hub of the square. He saw other running figures fall down under the roar of muskets and ducked into a doorway where he crouched, breathing heavily, beside a bleating lamb. The soldiers were coming closer, so he gave the noisy animal a kick that sent it out into the open, then pushed his shoulder against the door. It gave way and he half-fell into a narrow hallway that smelled of coffee. There he lay for several hours listening for footsteps and wondering what had happened to Manolo and the others. He could hear occasional musket fire and shouts in Spanish and French and, just before dawn, the sound of many horses galloping through the square accompanied by screams of fear.
When it was light he peeked out and saw hundreds of bodies scattered across the cobblestones, too many to have been killed by the shots in the night. Leaving his refuge he stepped over flattened torsos and broken skulls that the charging enemy

hooves had crushed. He wept at the shattered remains of the *Madrilenos* and searched frantically for any sign of the boy and his father. In the end it was a lamb that might have been the one he had abandoned to its fate that led him to the execution site. He followed it away from the carnage along a rising passageway, thinking perhaps it would lead him to the remnants of the flock and his lost companions. But when he emerged from the confines of the narrow corridor there was only further butchery. In the bright sunlight that reflected harshly off the rock wall he saw a pile of bodies and the earth stained red beneath them. The lamb had stopped and was licking the bloody face of a green-robed friar whose bald pate was covered with flies. Beside the friar Juan lay on his back in his white shirt, his open palms upturned to the sky.

"It is the remarkable quality of the gesture," the painter said. "Is he surrendering in despair or about to throw one last defiant cry in their faces? We cannot finally tell, and it is the ambiguity that haunts us."

"Or is he thinking about meeting his God?" the Bishop replied. "The friar beside him is clearly praying for the souls of them all."

"With respect, Your Grace, I think this is a Spaniard focused entirely on his last moment and he has made a choice, desolate or brave, about how he will spend it."

The cleric gazed sombrely at the famous artist who had been court painter to Charles IV and then to Napoleon's brother, Joseph, after the invasion. Things had not gone so well for him when Ferdinand was on the throne, but he still had a great many patrons and his work hung in palaces and stately homes all over Spain. He was a faithful Catholic, no doubt, and had produced a marvellous portrait of the martyrs Justine and Rufina, but there was also the infamous *La maja desnuda* who was, because of their rumoured affair, very likely the Duchess of Alba. That corrupt woman had died years before, some said of a fever, but the Bishop

believed with many others she had been deservedly poisoned by the jealous wife of a lover.

"It is not just him. Everything is done superbly, his companions, the soldiers, the blood-soaked earth. You say this boy is no more than fourteen, but the line and perspective in the drawing belong to a mature eye, even to a visionary one. Look at the few inches and infinite distance between the soldiers' guns and the bodies of their victims, and the extraordinary opposition between the concealed faces of the killers and ruthlessly exposed features of the dead and those about to die. It all circles around the man in white, though. You might say a statement of faith is implicit because his arms emphasize the church towers in the background, but really they have their own angle that is more encompassing of the rock immediately behind."

"The rock of the Church, perhaps."

The painter laughed. "I see I will not win this battle with you, Your Grace. But surely we can agree the boy has captured the horror of war on this earth whatever the possibilities of salvation beyond these desecrated bodies."

The Bishop sighed. "It is true," he said. "I can almost feel the bullets about to penetrate that man and his comrades."

The painter nodded. "Yes, and it has all been done with a simple stick of crayon." He tapped his finger on the piece of paper where it lay on the Bishop's desk. "Charcoal can only do so much, however. Think of this work in colour! The light that would come into play. You say this is all he has drawn, is that right?"

"Yes, and what you see is the only *complete* drawing. He does the sword and the guns and outspread hands over and over but quite apart from one another. It's as if he cannot connect them anymore."

"May I keep it?"

"Certainly. But if you do a painting make sure redemption is not forgotten."

"As always, Your Grace."

Recalling the lewd look in the eye of the Duchess as she lay back on her couch, the Bishop wasn't entirely assuaged by the painter's reference to constancy.

Juan had been arrested by the troops as he tried to follow the main cluster of sheep up the Calle Gran Via. Under the harsh glare of their torches, he tried to explain how he had come to be in Madrid and that he was not the rebel they took him to be, but they would not listen. Pushing him roughly ahead of them with a group of men he could see had been savagely beaten, they headed away from the square He looked around anxiously for Manolo. Andrès and the other herders could take care of themselves, but the boy was a novice to violence and, of course, did not know the city. He cursed himself for allowing his son to come on the return journey and looked back over his shoulder as they marched. He could be lying injured or even have been arrested by another troop of Frenchmen. Surely not! They had nothing to fear from boys! A soldier poked his ribs with his rifle barrel. "*Allez-vous-en!*" he cried angrily, and Juan needed no translation. Walking uphill now, he found himself beside a friar whose robe was stained with red spatter.

"What has happened here, Father? Why have so many been killed?"

The friar sighed heavily. "The people rose up against the French when they heard the Royal family was to be taken from the palace and sent to France. They had only pitchforks and machetes and many were shot down or trampled by the cavalry charge. Now the Bonapartes will give a lesson to those who survived."

Juan replied he knew nothing of this but was a simple sheepherder from Burgos returning with the flock from Andalusia.

"No, my son. Today you are just a Spaniard," the friar told him. "And you may soon have to die as one."

"Why are you here? Surely they cannot be against the church."

"I was giving comfort to the dying in the square. And since my robes are not those of an archbishop..." The friar shrugged. "I too am just a Spaniard."

"I must find my son," Juan declared. "He was with the flock. The sheep smelled the blood. Even my nose smelled it. When they panicked I looked back for Manolo but he wasn't there."

The friar gave no response, which only emphasized the loss for Juan. "Do you think they will harm a boy, father?"

"I believe they would. They shot women and children in the square, after all."

They came out of the narrow street into an open space where a large rock loomed under the sky like a giant, dormant creature whose coarse skin glowed dully in the flickering torchlight. Juan had only an instant to catch the anguished looks on the faces of several men standing against the rock-face before they were mowed down by a murderous volley from a rigid line of grey-clad Frenchmen. "*Madre de Dios*," he exclaimed, crossing himself automatically.

"Have courage, my son," the friar said, as they were herded toward the rock, slipping on the blood-slicked earth around the fallen bodies of their countrymen.

As he watched the Frenchmen reload their muskets, Juan searched the crowd for Manolo. The boy couldn't be here waiting for execution. Surely he had escaped the square and was with Andrès on his way to Burgos. He comforted himself with this thought and was then overcome with sadness that he would not see his wife and son again, or the mountain slopes covered by the white flock in spring. His body would be thrown into a pit and no one would know how and where he had died. The friar was beside him, his head bent and hands clasped in prayer. Behind

him another man was so close he could feel his hot breath on the back of his neck. The prayer made him think of God and the promises of Heaven he had heard since he was a boy. He could not take such possibility in, and the man`s breath kept him rooted to the hopelessness of the here and now. Standing dazed and passive as the soldiers raised their weapons, his arms helpless at his sides, he stared into the wavering shadows and saw a small figure take a step toward him. As he heard a Frenchman bark an order, Juan threw his arms in the air, spreading them wide to halt his son`s advance. `Manolo!` he cried as the bullets tore the love from his face.

4. Sign Language

That evening, after returning home from Aurelio's house, he poured himself a whiskey, picked an over-sized book of famous reproductions from the shelf, and studied *Bathers at La Grenouillère*. He liked the Impressionists generally because they illustrated that memorable de Kooning maxim he'd picked up in art school and never abandoned, "Content is just a glimpse." With their work your eyes weren't invited to settle on a particular feature, but took in the entire scene at once as if from a slowly rolling train or passing car. From this vantage point, looking neither backwards nor forwards, you gazed through the metaphorical window at landscape and occasional human figures only for a moment in view. So why was it this one that drew him to the glass more than any others? Whatever his final trust in de Kooning, he had to get off the moving vehicle for a while and pay attention to detail.

The four rowboats in the immediate foreground had a patchy, green-blue sturdiness inviting him to be seated without even thinking of embarkation. The three longer and narrower rowboats behind them, on the other hand, seemed more loosely tethered to the thin line of wharf as if just tied after a voyage. And the

small canoe-like vessel, separated from the others by a band of shimmering Seine water, appeared to be floating free, soon to disappear beyond the frame.

Monet`s colours danced across the canvas. The foliage stirred because of some invisible breeze conveyed by blurred brushstrokes in the leaves and branches, and the water was dappled by the intermingling of reflection and shadow from the boats and the six people on the wharf who stood halfway between the water and sky. The left-right symmetry of the painting was achieved by the position of two strolling women near the shore who, in the abundance of their apparel, seemed to weigh no less than the three figures at the far end. The wharf was like a long see-saw with a black-clad man acting as a fulcrum in the middle though he did not stand exactly in the center of the painting. The bottom-top balance was found in the equal weight given to the boats and the overhanging greenery; to the blue water on the near side of the wharf and paler water on the far side into which several bathers had ventured; and to the correspondence between the boats' oars, the trunks of trees, and the perpendicular lines of a small cabin in the background.

Along with all the luminosity and points of entry through various shades and tones, there was a barely discernible darkness in the painting that disturbed the communal immersion in the Seine and the seemingly comfortable social exchanges on the wharf and riverbank. Sand wondered for the first time why all the rowboats and one canoe were empty. Was it to signal that at some point they would be filled with bodies, all that human fragility bound for the other side of the river? It was true three-quarters of the work was in shadow, but the farthest bathers had swum out from under the foliage into the sun. If close attention revealed them as splashes of paint, this only emphasized the alliance of art and life against dissolution.

Whatever else was going on, and despite what he and Aurelio had said about the possible irrelevance of the personal, he had a deep feeling he was linked to

some aspect of his own experience in this work as well to a larger plane of existence. He stared at the boats, almost able to smell them—not the paint but the woody odour of their hulls and seats and the stagnant water on their decks. It wasn't just a memory of the Seine a hundred and fifty years ago that Monet gave him, but of all the waterways he had crossed and all the vessels whose thin boards, stretched canvas, and steel beams had borne him over the depths—the rented rowboats with silver fish on their floorboards, the curved hulls launched from docks and boathouse shallows, and once a trans-Atlantic liner with its coal-black smoke fading into delicately-brushed charcoal lines across the sky.

He remembered reading somewhere that the nose remembers what the eyes forget, and it was his nose that now took him back to that rocky northern shoreline, the green-scented pines coming down to the water's edge and leaving needled patterns on the glassy surface. The day before Annie drowned they had all gone for a picnic on an island near the far side of the lake. Katherine paddled in the bow and he supported her in the stern with consistent J-strokes to keep them on course, the eddies of water seeming to spin away from the canoe and vanish in blue light.

"Annie," he said to the little girl between them who was trailing her fingers in the lake, making tiny whirlpools of her own. "The water doesn't really move, you know. We go through the water and it stays in the same place."

"What about the wind driving the waves?" Katherine asked.

"All the wind does is stir up water molecules that bump into one another and create waves that go up and down."

He looked at his daughter who hadn't a clue about molecules. "Waves stay in the same place too, Annie. When the wind blows hard there's rows and rows of them from the middle of the lake all the way to the shore."

She was silent but smacked her palm into the wake beside the canoe to make her own white-caps that clung momentarily to the green hull. Then she puffed up her cheeks and blew out loudly. “No wind, no waves,” she yelled exuberantly.”

“That’s right. They just lie down and have a rest,” he said. “Waves get tired just like us.”

They’d been to the island before but had always put ashore on the small beach that faced their cabin back on the mainland. There Annie could play in the shallows and he could make a small fire of twigs and dead branches over which he’d roast some hotdogs. But this time they decided to circumnavigate the island first, never having seen the other side. It turned out to be an almost sheer cliff from which stubby pines grew sideways, its bottom descending into the depths as neatly as a painting sliding into a waiting frame. Indeed, when they looked down, they could see the finished picture clearly through twenty feet of liquid sealer.

As they drifted he studied the striations of the rock-face with their interlacing natural designs reminding him of Annie’s crayon markings not long ago. He became so intent on following one set of lines to the cliff-top that he did not at first register her excited cry. Then he caught Katherine’s exclamation, “My God!” as the canoe suddenly lurched sideways and her arm pointed at the wall. “Look, daddy, look,” Annie yelled, and suddenly there was the drawing.

It could so easily have been missed because lichen half-covered it and a bulge in the rock hid

the shapes entirely until you were almost alongside. What he saw was a green oval shell with four little legs protruding as well as a head with a tiny circle for the eye beside a jagged yellow line that could only be a lightning stroke. Both images were silhouetted in red. Annie reached out to touch the turtle as he told Katherine, “The

Algonquin lived here for thousands of years, but I've never heard of any rock paintings discovered in this part of the park."

"Agonkin." Her tiny fingers traced the outline of the shell several feet away.

"Algonquin, Annie. They're the Indians whose home all this was a long time ago." Then he corrected himself. "It still is their home. They just don't live here as much."

"Why?"

"Remember I said the waves just bumped into one another? Well, lots of people like us came along and bumped into the Indians, so they decided to go somewhere else." 'It was decided for them,' was what he should have said, but how could he explain colonial policies to a child.

"Got tired like the waves," she said. It wasn't a question.

"It's beautiful, whoever did it," Katherine declared. "We need to get a picture and send it to a museum." The camera was back in the cabin, and they agreed excitedly to return the next day to capture the image. He wondered if he should reproduce it in paint, which would convey its startling originality more surely than a photo. On the way home, after their picnic on the beach, Annie pointed at the small chop that had come up from the south and was bucking the canoe's prow. "Indians," she shouted to the water. "Lie down to rest."

Now he closed the book of reproductions and finished his whiskey. The rock painting was certainly still there while the Monet original hung in the National Gallery in London where he had seen it years before, neither of them different really from the bison on the walls of Font-de-Gaume. Only twenty thousand years from now the Paleolithic work would not have faded. Wind and rain would probably erode the Algonquin image significantly, but *Bathers* would have vanished entirely along with the minds' eyes that preserved it for how long—

decades, hundreds of years, a thousand? He lay back in his chair and drifted into sleep. Just before the darkness took him under completely he saw Annie on the wharf with the others.

When Claudia and Aurelio came for lunch the following day they steered the conversation away from his illness, she taking particular pleasure in this annual renewal of their friendship, talking of everything from New York delis to tempestuous feuds at the Met. He listened to them with enjoyment, making only an occasional comment to keep his hand in. As they sat opposite him on a divan, he wanted to paint their mutual comfort with one another, the way Aurelio absently patted her knee and the way she leaned naturally into his shoulder as they threw ideas into the room like baseballs, he thought, that he was meant to field. He laughed to himself at an image of them in striped uniforms and ball caps. He knew Aurelio didn't know the game at all, and if Claudia had ever been willingly to Yankee Stadium, it was only to sing the National Anthem.

At some point an upcoming Picasso retrospective in Paris was mentioned and, after they agreed to disagree about the merits of the 'Blue' period, he asked them, impulsively it must have seemed, if they had to choose a single work of art from their lifetime of viewing what it might be. Expecting a lot of humming and hawing, he was surprised when Claudia immediately responded that it wouldn't be a painting but a bronze statue from India that she'd seen in the Metropolitan.

"It's only about two feet high," she said, holding her palm above the table to indicate the approximate height, "but, God, is it beautiful. I should say 'God, is *she* beautiful' because I'm talking about Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva. I think from the 10th or 11th century."

"Why do you like her so much?" Sand asked.

Claudia's face lit up. "Because of how she stands, with her weight on one leg and her hip arching into her very thin waist and up to the curves of her breasts. Which are fully developed and exposed, I might add. But it's the combination of body and brain that's so strong. She's gesturing with her right hand which is holding a sacred thread, as if making a point to Shiva or some lesser gods that they will definitely pay attention to. Oh yes, the filigree patterns of her leggings and in the jewels she wears are exquisite. I do have some nice paintings on my walls in New York, but I'd give them all up to have her standing on a table by my bed." She laughed and took up her glass of wine. "No, I wouldn't do that. She deserves to be seen by as many people as possible. I think she's called *Standing Parvati*, but I'd call her something like *The Sensual Mind*. Sorry to go on, Ben, but you did ask. Now I'd like to know why."

"I'll tell you that, but first it's only fair to learn Aurelio's choice."

"You must find me a picture of her, Claudia," the doctor said, "because I'm afraid I'll never get to the Metropolitan. Not unless it moves to Toulouse," he added with a smile. "Meanwhile, I will make two choices, in fact, to celebrate my dual ancestry. For the Spanish, Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, which is in the Prado. It's a bleak painting because the guns of Napoleon's firing squad emphasize what a conquering power can do. And there's also a dark strip of night dominating much of the upper half. But the light that comes from *within* the doomed figure in white with his arms defiantly upraised overcomes the guns and almost calms the grief of the onlookers, including us." Aurelio paused, and gazed out the window for a few moments towards the Pyrenees and Spain beyond. Then he looked back at his friends. "Sorry," he said. "A bit of the *duende*. My other choice, the French one, might seem mundane in comparison, but that's precisely why I like it, and, strangely enough, because it doesn't exist anymore."

Claudia was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“I’m speaking of Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers*. I’m sure Ben knows the story. It was savagely attacked when it appeared at the Paris Salon in 1850, but a Paris tailor paid hundreds of francs for it soon after. Much later it was sold to the Dresden Museum and was destroyed in the Allied bombing attacks in 1945. My father saw it there between the wars and told me about it when I was old enough to understand this loss of French heritage. So an image of an image is all I know. But that’s how we see paintings most of the time, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but why does this particular image matter to you?” Sand asked.

“It’s absolutely timeless,” the doctor exclaimed. “There are two men—one is lifting a heavy pan of stones, and the other is using a long-handled hammer to break another stone into small pieces. The date is 1849, but they could be working in a quarry up in the hills today. Of course their clothing is somewhat dated, but not that much. They’re doing the basic work that Goya’s man of light did before he was caught up in the struggle against the French, and that his children and grandchildren would do after him. When you and I were talking the other day, Ben, about paintings that make their way alone into the future, I was wondering how Courbet’s lost original fitted into things.”

“You mean you two have had this conversation before?”

“Not exactly, Claudia,” Sand replied. “But we did talk about painting much as you and I did recently about music and singers. No conclusions, just some interesting speculation.”

Claudia nodded her thanks as he stood and refilled their wine glasses. “Why the inquiry, Ben? Are you thinking of making any purchases on our behalf?”

He laughed. “I’ve done fairly well for myself, but not enough to buy a Monet or Goya. As for my questions, I’d guess they’ve probably got something to do with my shortened career prospects.”

Claudia looked away, but he could see Aurelio watching him closely.

“I’m not feeling depressed about it, but I am feeling somewhat preoccupied by what I want to do with my last year or so. I’ve never had to think this way before. There was always the painting I was immediately involved with and no question there’d be one after that, and so on.”

“Aren’t you working now?” Claudia asked.

“No, I finished a painting the other day, and for the first time in my life I’m not simply picking up a brush and continuing on. It’s a kind of artist’s block before the biggest block of them all, I guess. Unless,” he said, turning to Aurelio with a broad smile, “there’s an easel waiting for me in God’s studio.”

Aurelio shrugged then gave a little smile in return. “What you’re going through is understandable, Ben. As we discussed not long ago, you’re asking yourself whether what you’ve been doing all your life has mattered. And you’re lucky. Most people don’t get to ask this question with so much positive evidence around them.”

Sand turned to Claudia. “What about you? Last week I asked you what our art was worth in the end and if it matters whether your voice will last until then. We got sidetracked by my situation.”

“I’ll answer you now,” she replied. “I don’t know if God has a studio, but let’s suppose for a moment that He does. Then I’d like to think that my voice filled with the extraordinary music of Puccini, Mozart, and so many others will gain me entry to a small corner of it.”

"And if it's just an imagined studio? Where does that leave your voice and the music?"

"In any corner where we sing or paint, or"—she smiled at Aurelio and took his hand—"we take care of people before the lights go out. All of it—singing, painting, caring is better than silence or any paralyzing self-absorption."

Sand gave a mock grimace. "I knew you'd be direct, my dear. But the question is, what do I do in the shrinking space I have left?"

"You know the answer to that, Ben," Claudia told him. "You go out with a brush in your hand. You keep painting as long as you can."

He motioned to her and she followed him down the hall to his paint-spattered corner. "There," he said, pointing at his last signed work.

Claudia looked at the painting for a long time before she spoke. When she did her voice was muted, so soft that he had to lean toward her to hear the words. "It's the Met and all the other houses," she said. "On the last night."

He knew what she meant, and long after she and Aurelio had left, he sat on a stool absorbed by the little dwelling beneath the overwhelming sky. It didn't matter that Claudia wasn't performing any more. Her analogy stood for all performances, then, now, and to come. They were represented by the light in the window that flashed in the face of relentless, advancing darkness, a light that would burn until it was consumed by the vortex when silence would be all that remained. He stared at this space where Annie had briefly appeared. He stared until the sky swallowed it, until all visible signs of the survivor appeared to have vanished, until suddenly, with absolute clarity, he saw the animals on the wall at Font-de-Gaume. They shone there, and then from the same dark stone he saw the Monet emerging. The next morning, he packed a lunch, put a tube of acrylic paint in his pocket, and with

a flashlight larger than the one he kept in the car drove south toward the mountains.

He couldn't recall exactly where the dirt track branched off the highway, but after two hours he realized he'd driven too far. Heading back north, he wondered if he'd be able to find the turn-off as he'd taken it by chance in the first place. He drove so slowly that other drivers passed him disdainfully, their horns blaring. Finally, after he'd gone through a small village and up a winding grade a few kilometres on, he saw the entrance. He drove in as far as he could, looking for tire marks in front of him but seeing none, then got out and began his walk uphill. Aware of what was waiting when he reached the end of the trail, he headed straight for the tree that hid the cave's opening. The branches seemed a little thicker, though the pine had obviously been full-grown for a long time, but he managed to push past them and into the fissure. The way along the passage wasn't as narrow as he remembered but it did seem to descend more steeply. He timed himself. Even though he knew where he was going, it took several minutes to reach the chamber.

Nothing had changed. He went straight to the remains of the fire and saw it hadn't been rekindled. The footprints of the old boots as well as his own from his first visit marked the thin sediment on the floor, but there were no others as far as he could tell. He shone the light around the walls and the larger beam showed him their expanse as well as that of the ceiling. He paced off the dimensions. The room was roughly thirty metres long and twenty wide. The ceiling he judged to be six or seven metres high. He stepped up close to the walls and ran his hand over the stone. It was fairly smooth and didn't flake beneath his touch, although there were bumps and occasional small cracks running vertically and horizontally. He took out the tube and rubbed some of the red acrylic on the wall with his finger, a first

stroke. He`d need to use sealer but he was sure the paint would work here. There were too many tones in the Monet for only crushed rock and oxides. Besides, he didn`t want to emulate the original cave-painters. The bison and reindeer belonged to them. His would be a young art in comparison, and it would be just partly his own, but maybe it would have the same result. He turned off the light and sat for a while in the perfectly-silent darkness.

On the way home he thought of the equipment he'd need. There should be battery-operated lights, first of all, hooded ones that could be directed at the wall and enough of them to illuminate the entire cavern. They`d have to be collapsible so he could get them down the tunnel. Then knee-pads and a canvas sheet to spread on the floor. He`d take a stool as well. Monet`s painting wasn`t large, about a metre in width and less than that in height, so he could control the space by picking a spot on the wall that allowed him to be comfortable in front of it. Not too much back strain from bending and stretching. Even if it wasn`t oils he could use, matching the acrylic colours wouldn`t be too difficult. It was the vision of the painting he wanted to leave behind, something that was possible on a cave wall, even if absolute reproduction was not. How long it would take he didn`t know, but with trips back and forth and days off here and there maybe three weeks or a month. Not a great deal of effort for something that might last twenty thousand years.

As he shopped for the items he needed, which included a trip to Toulouse for the lights and knee-pads, he considered the task he had set for himself. On a practical level it would require some planning. He thought about camping in the cave but realized, apart from the question of the nightly encounter between the stone floor and his aging limbs, the matter of food, drink, and bodily functions wouldn't be easy to resolve. Even if the painting took him a few weeks, that still

meant packing a great deal of food, and it would all have to be of the dry and packaged variety. And he'd have to bring everything from dishes to toilet paper. No, he wasn't trying to replicate the daily lives of the cave-painters, even with modern conveniences. He just wanted to put a painting on the wall where it would last. This acceptance of his distance from the Paleolithic left him to focus on the art. He'd take charcoal sticks and pencils and a collection of soft and stiff brushes. A wet palette would be best so the acrylics wouldn't dry too quickly, especially at the beginning when he'd be feeling his way on the limestone canvas.

He knew the Monet reproduction in his book provided only one take on the colours, so he went to the internet café and downloaded the image from several different sites, including the National Gallery itself. The differences were amazing. In the London copy the overhanging foliage wasn't nearly as dark and foreboding, and it seemed pretty clearly to be in the distance, above the bathers' heads, rather than in the foreground over the boats. In another, the bottoms of the boats were definitely brown boards not the flat green of the hulls and gunwales. The more he thought about this, the more obvious it was that he'd have to go to London and see the painting first-hand. That wouldn't be too much of a problem—one day on the train each way and two more in the city. He'd already made some enquiries with a local travel agent when one morning the project changed.

He'd been focusing on the *Bathers*, studying the brushstrokes that delineated the passing presence of the figures at the end of the wharf, when he realized the woman with her hand cocked against the curve of her hip, placing her weight on one leg, reminded him of Claudia's Parvati sculpture. He had readily visualized Aurelio's selection of the Goya and Courbet paintings, but he'd never looked up the Indian statue as he'd intended, even though Claudia's brief depiction of it had been moving and, as a choice for the ages, very convincing. Back at the internet

café he typed in “Standing Parvati 10th Century India” and watched dozens of images appear. When he called her up in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, the photograph of the bronze figure from the Chola period was exactly the same as everything else he just seen because no colour reproduction was involved, just a slight shading difference due to backlighting.

Claudia’s alternative title for the piece was more than apt. The line from the Parvati’s direct facial expression to her gesturing right hand was unbroken, and the power of what she might be saying to Shiva or anyone else was clearly evident. But the thrust of her breasts and the casual sweep of her left arm around her hip reflected her thoughts so perfectly as to emphasize the sensual correspondence between body and mind. It was intentionally ironic, Sand was sure, that the eternal nature of this goddess was displayed in such corporeal splendour. The sculptor’s use of bronze had been a thousand-year statement against the crumbling of mortal clay.

So why not put her on the cave wall too? She wasn’t a painting, but she was a great work of art whose anonymous creator fit right in with the unknown originators of Font-de-Gaume and with his obscurity in his own cave as well. He couldn’t reproduce any signature in a painting of her, but he knew she could stand alone.

What the Parvati had to say to him widened his sense of what it was he wanted to leave behind. More than one painting opened up further possibilities, though he had only so much time. How many works could he do in a year or less, and which ones besides the two he had? Aurelio’s Goya and Courbet certainly. Why should posterity’s view be confined to the preferences of professional artists? The doctor’s passion for his cultural heritage had an undeniable validity, and Sand liked the idea of Spanish involvement since the first cave paintings had been discovered at

Altamira in the foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees over twenty years before those at Font-de-Gaume. As for Courbet, how fitting the subject of his particular work was for the stone walls. Let's say I can do one a month from start to finish, he thought. "That's a dozen paintings," he said aloud, and laughed. They would make a much bigger impact twenty millennia from now than a single Monet. If he could maintain the pace for twelve months that meant choosing eight other works. Since he couldn't see the original of *The Stone Breakers*, and there wasn't time for a trip to New York as well as London, he'd just have to use what was offered in books and by websites.

But he hadn't gone very far down this road when he realized how tenuous such plans were. It was almost July. That gave him at most four months in the cave before the really cold weather set in. He'd probably be able to work with a fire, but come November there would be snow on the high ground and it wouldn't be so easy to access the site. He also had to admit he didn't know what his strength would be like four months away, let alone six or eight. Taking a winter break into account, he needed to slow down and choose the paintings that would carry him into the early spring. Then he'd see where he was and whether he could continue.

Over the next few days he thought about what he might include on the wall along with the Monet, the Goya, the Courbet, and the Parvati figure. With all the abundance of material in European art history, and whatever tips of the hat he always gave Rembrandt, Raphael, and the *Pièta* of Michelangelo in the Vatican, he had always preferred Brueghel with his uncompromising exposures of village life, especially *The Return of the Hunters*. The atmosphere arising from the blending of light and colour, the lacework of intersecting lines, and the tensions implied in the hunters' position above the village with its inhabitants skating over the thin ice of Middle Ages existence—all these elements combined to create a haunting portrait

of a society barely hanging on despite the apparent order in the division of work and play. The several churches with their prominent steeples gave people a grip on the slippery surface of their lives, but they were in the background of the painting and dwarfed by the foreground trees through which the hunters and their dogs made their way.

Sand sighed. How could he let go of the chance to paint van Eyck's superb *Marriage of the Arnolfini*, da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Caravaggio's *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, or anything by Vermeer? The simple answer was, of course, he was dying and having to make choices he would not otherwise entertain. He had to stop worrying about what he was leaving out. He wasn't here to paint a chronology or represent cultural eras. Nonetheless, he was aware that, the Breughel aside, he and his friends had come up with three nineteenth-century European works and one non-western piece. So where did this leave twentieth century painting and, perhaps more especially, North America, in his subterranean plans?

The depressing image of the paper headstones came back into his mind. He shook it off. No doubt the task he was setting for himself was overly ambitious, even foolish, but he wouldn't just lie down and die before he had to. There was a song Peggy Lee had sung when he was a boy in which she asked, in the face of fire, false spectacle, and lost love, "Ìs that all there is?" and then proclaimed, if so, she`d "just keep dancing." It was all he could do as well.

"Do you think there'll be any problems?"

He and Aurelio were sitting at their usual café table with their newspapers and coffees. It was a Saturday morning and most of the village inhabitants were out and about, some, like Sand, having been to the baker's, and others, more ambitious like the doctor, having picked up their weeks' fruits and vegetables at the local market.

They watched one stout woman walk by with the equivalent of a shopping cart of food stuffed into two bags. Aurelio noted her weight and commented dryly that it was fortunate she had someone to share such a hoard or her blood pressure would get even worse. Then he replied to the question at hand.

"You mean physical problems, of course. I leave any artistic difficulties to you."

"Yes, I guess I'm asking for an educated guess as to how long my normal strength will last."

"It's hard to say, Ben. But I expect you'll make it through the fall alright. Even so, you'll be putting a lot more strain on yourself with the driving back and forth and the commitment you've made to this project. There's no telling how your body will react. You might be fine, you might not."

He had wanted to inform Aurelio and Claudia together of his plans, but she had gone off to Paris for ten days, and he was almost ready to begin work. He'd decided to tell them because in an important way their choices of the Goya, Courbet, and Parvati had inspired him. On a more practical level, he wouldn't otherwise be able to explain his daily absence from the village. Aurelio listened closely, nodding his head in agreement at the inclusion of Brueghel.

"I admire your selective ability," he said. "I'd probably never be able to make up my mind about such a matter. And what about the twentieth century? Why not Picasso?"

Sand had told him he'd come to a decision about more recent works only the previous night, but that there was no one Picasso that moved him deeply. "I admire just about everything he ever did, and he is the century's most important artist, there's no doubt. If that were my main criterion, however, I'd have to have

Michelangelo and Rembrandt, wouldn't I? You'll probably be surprised at the direction I've taken."

"I am, as you say in English, all ears," said the doctor.

"Isn't there an equivalent in Spanish for that?"

"If I translate it literally, *Soy todes orejas*, it's hilarious." We'd probably say *Escucho con gran interés*."

Sand raised his arm and signalled to the waiter that two more coffees were in order. "I've decided on a Canadian and an American," he said, "not for nationalistic reasons but because the paintings affect me in profoundly different ways. The New York painter you might have heard of, Robert Rauschenberg. He died just a couple of years ago in his early eighties. His work all along was very avant-garde."

"No, I haven't heard of him, but you know the moderate Picasso of the 'Blue' period is more to my taste than the later jacks-of-all-trades, so you shouldn't be surprised."

"Well, there's no doubt Rauschenberg was influenced by Picasso. What mid-century artist wasn't? But he was his own man and did some startling original and experimental works. Some called him a pop artist, but he was much more than a Warhol. The pieces I've always liked are his collages of form and content. Anyway, an oil and silkscreen work called *Tracer* is what I've chosen. I'll have to paint the silkscreen area, of course, but it's the strength of the collage images that counts for me. He reproduces a classic Rubens nude and puts her alongside an American eagle, and two military helicopters that anticipate the Vietnam War. Then there's a mix of touched-up photos that create a New York street scene with cars, buildings, and a large cafeteria sign. He also paints the outlines of two

rectangular boxes that you make of what you will. They perhaps suggest the containment of art, but since they're transparent art isn't necessarily confined."

"It sounds a little too busy for me."

"It *is* busy, but remarkably uncluttered for all that. Anyway, it's all about the collisions and fusions of contemporary life, and my brain never stops when I'm in front of it."

"Have you seen the original."

"No, it's in a Kansas City gallery, but the reproduction on the internet is quite spectacular. I'll show it to you, if you like.' But let me tell you about the Canadian first, Alex Colville." Sand knew he was running on a little, but also that his less excitable friend would help keep a rein on his emotions.

"Is this someone you know personally?"

"I've met him, but we never became friends. Moved in different circles, that's all. He was quite a bit more traditional than Rauschenberg in his political and social views. I say 'was' because he's a very old man now, around ninety I think, and not producing or speaking much publicly anymore. But his paintings are something else entirely. They're in the magic realism school for the most part. I really want you to see *Horse and Train*. In fact, let's go around to the internet shop so you can look at it before I offer any comments."

They finished their coffee, chatting about the small chance the French football team had in the upcoming World Cup. The results hadn't been the same since Zidane's head-butt of an Italian player in the 2006 final. Sand then pointed to the Paris newspaper story about the right-wing response to immigrant issues and the President's efforts to win over such voters with his proposed burkha ban.

"My mother was an immigrant," Aurelio said. "And since I was conceived in Spain, I'm something of an *émigré* myself. Of course, I didn't go back to Spain

until after Franco died. I've never liked edicts that singled out anyone, whether from a parliament or a dictator."

They walked across the square and down a small side street. The internet café was frequented by young people whose parents refused to pay for the expensive dial-up system that connected the town to the rest of the world. And because it was a Saturday, there was a crowd of teenagers inside. Fortunately most of them hovered around a single terminal, laughing at the stand-up routine of a famous American comic. Sand led Aurelio to a screen at the back of the room.

"Look at this for a little while," he said. "I'll order us another coffee." He pressed a few keys to bring up a search engine, entered 'Colville, horse and train," and left Aurelio to wait the few seconds before the image came up.

Some teens were in the counter line, so it took a full ten minutes before he returned with the steaming beverages, extra sugar on the side for the doctor. "Not the same as our regular fare," he said, "but at least it's not instant." Aurelio was staring at the screen. "What do you think?" Sand asked.

"It's quite amazing. I can see why it's had an effect on you." Aurelio absently stirred his coffee. "It emphasizes so powerfully the moment that must give way to all the implications of the next one. Everything is in suspension, but the movement of the animal is so palpable. You might think it's an homage to that famous photograph where the horse has all four hooves off the ground, but if you look closely I think you can see a bit of gravel touching a rear hoof." He sat back and moved a hand slowly from side to side in front of him like an affirmative blessing. "There's so much grace and speed to balance the train's power."

They remained silent for a few moments, then Aurelio pointed to the light shining on the front of the engine. "That's needed to illuminate something more than collision between the machine and the natural world."

"Yes," Sand replied. My feeling is the horse will pass right through that light and come out on another side we can only imagine. It's so complex, though, because no one will notice and the train won't be altered as a result."

It was his turn to point now, and his finger touched the left side of the screen halfway along the single track. "What's written on the other side of that blank sign is interesting to think about. Does it mark a destination? Is it a warning or an affirmation?"

"Don't forget, this is a track that runs both ways, so the side that we see is significant."

"Maybe we're supposed to fill in the blank given our response to the painting. You titled my painting on the easel. What would you put on the sign?"

Aurelio rubbed his chin. "I think it's fine just as it is."

Sand tried not to show his disappointment. "We'll get to the Rauschenberg another time. The intentions might seem too contrived right now."

The teens laughed loudly at the far terminal. When the screen went dark, the doctor didn't object.

"The horse is dreaming the train," Claudia said. She had returned from Paris a few days after he had shown the Colville to Aurelio, having made arrangements to conduct another Master Class there before she went back to the States at the end of the summer. Now she sat in her kitchen holding a copy of the painting he'd printed off at the internet café.

Sand was a little startled by her interpretation, but knew the painting was wide open to response on a level that came out of the unconscious. It seemed like a waking human dream—the painter's—that created the image of horse and train. But what Claudia was talking about was an animal unconscious. He thought of the

creatures at Font-de-Gaume and whether they were meant to see one another through reverie that might explain their relative size and positioning on the wall. People had speculated about drugs and hallucinatory trances for the Paleolithic painters, but no one, as far as he knew, had pondered the animals' possible states of mind.

She interrupted his own trance by asking when Colville had done the painting.

In the mid-fifties. Why?"

"Well, it's interesting that the steam engine in the picture hasn't got too long before it becomes extinct."

"So one outmoded form of transportation meets another?"

"Yes."

"But it's the animal not the machine that will die."

"And that's why I prefer the horse's dream. That way it doesn't die. That way the painting goes on forever as well without a violent conclusion. But my question now is why have you shown me this?

She listened quietly as he outlined his plans for the cave, explaining why he'd chosen the works he had. Only when he mentioned how long he thought the seven paintings would take to reproduce did she turn away from him and look out the window. Taking a deep breath she exhaled slowly. "You're counting on a year, Ben."

"Maybe, but I should be able to do it all in less than that. Once I get the Monet up, I'll be happy. I want someone twenty thousand years from now to discover it and open their eyes wider than ever before."

"Do you want them to see what you see?"

"That's not exactly possible. What you suggested about the horse's dream was new to me. But the painting—all great paintings—talk a universal language. That's

why an American opera singer can appreciate the statue of a goddess from another culture and era entirely."

"And the other works? What order will you do them in?"

"I don't know yet. I have to go down to the cave again and figure out where they're going on the walls. I plan to do them life-size, you know, and a couple of them are pretty large. Aurelio's Goya is about nine feet by thirteen."

"I'll have to find all the works online," she said. I've seen the Goya at the Prado and the Brueghel in Vienna, but that was quite a while ago so I'd have to study their reproductions. I don't know the Courbet except as Aurelio described it. Rauschenberg was very big when I was a girl in New York, and I must have seen his work when we took school trips to MOMA, but what you mention of his isn't familiar."

"You and Aurelio both need to see *Tracer*. I'll encourage him to go online, but you know he views the new technology with more than a little scepticism. Your Parvati is there as well. I can show you some fine colour reproductions of the rest in my various art books."

"Will we get to see them on the cave walls?"

Sand hesitated before replying, but she was studying the Colville and didn't seem to notice. How could he refuse them since they'd been so intimately involved in his selection process. More than that, they were dear to him, and he had told them what he wanted to do because of their friendship. He smiled at Claudia. "Absolutely," he declared. "But only at the end. No works in progress."

He drove down to the cave several days later, taking with him the portable lights, a canvas groundsheet, a waist-high stool, and a collapsible ladder he'd also purchased in Toulouse. As always the traffic heading south was fairly light, and he

was able to reach the dirt track in just under two hours. It took him four trips to carry the equipment up from the car and along the tunnel, holding a flashlight awkwardly in a hand that had to support part of his load. The fir tree at the entrance was the greatest obstacle for the inflexible ladder though the folded limbs of the lights slipped easily through the branches. Finally, after setting up the lights, he sat on the spread-out canvas sheet in the middle of the floor, chewed a sandwich and drank some juice he'd brought along, and studied the walls.

The room's rough rectangular shape yielded four main sections. The useable space on the two longer walls was probably twenty feet long by ten high and on the end wall opposite the entrance perhaps fifteen by ten. On either side of the entrance were smaller areas of stone with the same height as the others but only five or six feet in width. From afar all these areas appeared relatively smooth, though perspective would be altered by the inescapable bulges here and there along with some slightly concave segments that he might be able to use when the presentation of distance was an issue. Finishing the sandwich, he took a measuring tape from his pocket and got down to details.

The three largest works were the Goya, the Courbet, and the Rauschenberg. The Goya would take up most of one wall by itself while, directly opposite, the Rauschenberg and Courbet could go side by side with adequate space in between. He turned toward back wall. After many minutes of pondering, he decided to put *Horse and Train* there beside *The Return of the Hunters*. The Colville was surprisingly small considering the power of the image, and the Brueghel was just five feet wide, so there'd be more room between them than was provided in most galleries. That gave the Monet and the Parvati their own positions on either side of the entrance.

He stood up in the middle of the room and slowly turned around, imagining the paintings hung on the stone unframed. Technically, he was confident he could bring it off. Of course, he had yet to see how the acrylic would be affected by the different canvas, but enough feel-good people and serious artists had been decorating small rocks with the paint for a long time and selling them successfully. No, the question wasn't the paint but the intricacies of the limestone, which, when he stepped closer, was like skin, pockmarked and minutely scarred with ridges and shadings. The initial sealer would help, but before that he'd have to sand the surface lightly to remove the most obvious abrasions. In the end, a transparent glaze would protect the acrylic while adding an almost imperceptible layer between the wall and the viewer's eye.

Satisfied with such considerations, he sat down again and crunched into an apple that he'd taken from his jacket pocket. Like those cave-artists from so long ago, he could work only with what he had—his hands, his eyes, and what the seven works he'd chosen meant to him and the society in which he lived. He'd painted for a long time and ultimately believed, despite any ongoing doubts, that art did matter whatever destruction it might not be able to prevent—war, poverty, the death of a child. He'd also sensed his belief was a kind of faith no more capable of delivering perfect illumination than the major religions that had accompanied artistic expression through the ages. Now that faith was being put to a test in sudden and demanding ways by his final illness. He looked around the cave. Was this the right place to make a stand of some kind? Was this where he could ease Katherine's unforgiving distinction between his love for Annie and his creativity? Always more questions than answers, but since the answers weren't forthcoming, he'd better stop the interrogation and get on with his task.

5. Bathers at La Grenouillère

Sand drew a black vertical line on the rock wall. To begin with, it was all he had.

*

Philippe shivered as if the finger of someone's hand had lightly touched the back of his neck. The day was warm, and his black jacket was unbuttoned to the soft breeze from the river. He was standing, hands in pockets, in the middle of the wharf watching the bathers in the water and those who strolled or sat beneath the trees on the bank. There were three people to his right talking at the wharf's end, two women in bathing costumes and a frock-coated gentleman whose voices were loud enough for snatches of conversation to reach him. They were talking, of all things, about an agricultural bill that was before the Parliament, something about

the wheat prices in the provinces versus those in Paris. It seemed to be a strangely formal exchange for such an informal site, and the rigidities of politics were in strong contrast to the lapping of the water against the posts and the muted light that came through the branches and leaves. Two fully-clothed women were on his left, but he couldn't make out their murmurings as they walked slowly to where the wharf met the land.

Many people were swimming in the river or rather they were sitting in the water close to shore and standing immersed to their waists and shoulders farther out. Laughing and talking, they seem to have attained the relaxation they were obviously seeking on a summer's day. Beyond them the river stretched away towards the south, trees lining its banks, tall and stately, though cut back in some places to allow unseen sheep and cattle access to drink. Behind him were the empty boats, at least a dozen of them waiting for their passengers who would take them out in the later afternoon, the men rowing while the women sat in the stern shaded by parasols and trailing the fingers of one hand in the water. The children, as they did now, would run and tumble on the grass or continue to jump in the shallows under the watchful eyes of spinster aunts or older siblings. It was a scene part of him wished he could join, but he was an outsider now even if that had not always been so.

"Where will you go today, Philippe? What will you do?" his mother had asked.

"Just for a walk by the river."

She sighed. "You must have worn a path along the bank by now. How long can you keep this up?"

"You mean how long will I continue to do nothing but walk?" There was no aggression in his voice because he hadn't an answer to her question or his own. He

knew she asked hers out of love and that his muted query was all he could offer since he no longer loved himself.

"Yes," she said. "You know you may stay here as long as you like, but sooner or later you must get on with your life, get on with..."

"Get on with what I want to do, you mean?"

"Yes, of course."

"But I've told you before, mother, I don't want to do anything anymore. Whatever happens from now on will happen to me and not because I have any intentions of my own."

"That's because you blame yourself. I understand your guilty feelings, but I don't understand why you let them hamper you so."

"That's not it at all. I'm open to anything that encounters me. I just won't seek out that encounter. The path you're so concerned about is down along the river and among lots of people making lots of noise. I haven't shut myself off from the world.

"Do you talk with any of these people?"

"They're too busy with their own lives, as they should be. Just yesterday I overheard a gentleman educating two women bathers about the price of wheat. I was close enough that he could have included me, but he didn't know I was listening."

"Did you make any effort to speak with him or the women?"

"No, but that's because I'm no longer interested in the price of wheat. If I ever was," he added needlessly.

"And the others you see by the river?"

"They're swimming or rowing or strolling in pairs. Everyone strolls in pairs, it seems. I'm the only one walking alone."

"You could invite a friend."

He didn't reply for a few moments. "I did have friends," he said finally. "But they became leery of a man who lost the faith that was once so important to him."

"You were meant to be a priest, Philippe."

"No, mother, I was not."

She began to weep quietly, and he turned and left the room.

When he was a boy he asked his father about God. He must have been seven or eight so he knew about Adam and Eve in the garden and Jesus dying on the cross, though he wasn't always sure about why God wanted Abraham to kill Isaac or how God spoke to Moses through a burning bush.

"You go to church, Philippe" was the direct but not unkind reply. "What else do you want to know?" His father, a cabinetmaker, was a practical man. For him, if you had the basic tools, you knew what to make of anything. In this case, the basic tools were the words of the Bible and the town's priest. He didn't expect that Philippe had yet mastered the holy book, but he was confident his only son paid heed to the sermons of Father Honoré.

"I know God is wise, *papa*, but how does He know everything that we do. How does He know when we are good and bad?"

"The Lord sees into our hearts, my son. We hide everything there."

Philippe put his hand on his chest to feel the thumping of that special organ and wondered, not for the first time, how it contained so much. Perhaps the faster it beat the more it held. If that was so, he'd have to run up and down the stairs every day and through the town streets when he was bringing home meat from the butcher or fruit and vegetables from the stalls. He didn't want what he knew to fade or even disappear. But what about the glorious feeling of contentment he had

when he lay lazily by the stream with his fishing line in the water or how good he felt when he awoke from a long night's sleep?

"Why do we hide things, *papa*?"

His father stopped planing the plank on the trestle in front of him and looked down at his son. "So the Lord can find them, I suppose. Why are you asking these questions today?"

"Sometimes I think about God. I wish I could know Him. Is that...blasphemy?" he asked, hesitating a little over this big word he'd only recently learned.

"I don't think it is, but perhaps Father Honoré can help you better than I can."

That was how he became an altar-boy, from wanting to know God.

He loved the smell of the church, the incense and polished carved wood. He loved the swishing sound his cassock made as he crossed the stone floor, the murmur of the congregation as they entered the holy space, and the sound of the tower bell as it called them in. He loved the ceremony of which he was part, carrying the processional cross and the thurible, pouring water over the priest's hands before the Eucharist, watching the upturned faces in their pews as the priest told them of sin's danger and the promises of eternal life. He knew he would always have to struggle with acts and meanings of sin because guilt was involved. That was what confession and absolution were for. If you didn't sin, there would be no need for confession and forgiveness and so your relationship with God wouldn't be the same, the one he realized as he grew older that kept him fearful and in thrall at the same time. But eternal life, the life of the soul, was something he found hard to grasp.

In his teens, his friends treated him as the expert on all matters religious. He soon realized they were telling him things they didn't admit to Father Honoré in confession, usually about bodily temptations and thoughts about particular town

girls. He accepted this role because he felt no need to share his secrets with others his age. Like them he used his hand to pleasure himself beneath his sheets and felt corrupted. Like them his eyes wandered over Eloise Frenette as she left him behind in her wake on the main street or bent to slice bread in her father's bakery. She was a few years older than he and his group and, it was assumed, more experienced in important ways. Strangely, while they always spoke frankly of their lust for her, they did so in subdued voices as if she were nearby and needed protection from their uncensored words, the same voices they used when they sought him out with their remorseful admissions. As for Father Honoré, Philippe would confess his solitary self-abuse to relieve his mind as he had his body but never with enough precision to reveal Eloise as the nightly object of his affections. It was enough that God could see into his heart. He didn't want the priest looking in as well, even if the confession booth was supposed to keep him anonymous.

Such attention from his friends and concerns for his personal privacy kept him emotionally busy, but what occupied his thoughts much of the time was his own mortality. The Bible was full of death. As far as he could tell, only prophets lived to a ripe old age. All the 'begats' seemed to be matched by early deaths and earthly miseries in contrast with the streets of heavenly gold. Who wouldn't want to be with the angels? All you had to do was keep your head down and live a decent life. If you weren't prepared to pillage, murder, or force yourself on Eloise, you had a good prospect of lasting forever. Of course there was always chance in your life, the limb falling on the woodcutter, the unexplained collapse of the doctor himself, the disease that chose certain individuals in their youth and spared others. That was why you had to be prepared every day to meet God's judgement. But he felt it was also why life mattered so much, things like the smell of the earth after a rain, the flutter of meadow flowers in a summer wind, the taste of fresh bread every

morning, and the familiar movements of his mother and father at their everyday tasks.

He knew that everyone had their own smells, visions, tastes, and family commonplaces, not just in the town but all over France and the entire world. And he knew these mattered to them just as much as to him, that their loss was inconceivable unless, as Father Honoré insisted, Heaven was the solace. But while he wanted eternal salvation, he didn't want his earthly existence simply to disappear without a trace. His parents would have said that was what children were for, and he knew this was true up to a point. They carried on your blood and, for a few decades, memories of whatever experiences you shared with them or told them about. After that there were your grandchildren who had only childhood exchanges with you and eventually their own place in the family line to consider. Everybody faded away in the end. He didn't want to think that was why Heaven existed in the first place, but sometimes he did.

Eloise was married the year he turned fifteen. The lucky man was a farrier from another town, not much older than her and very strong and handsome all the boys had to admit. They weren't invited to the wedding, of course, but stood outside the church to cheer the bride and groom and even tied a metal can to the axle of their wagon as they set off laughing for their new home.

"I'd like to be him tonight!" one of his friends declared.

"Yes, yes!" the others chimed in, each anticipating, no doubt, his own lonely tribute that same night to a now-lost love. The farrier's home was just a few miles away, but they would see Eloise, if they were lucky, only when she visited her parents' house. They had all heard that you died a little with every hot-handed release, and he wondered now whether it wasn't a larger death they were suffering with her departure. It was one thing to make silent love to a creature whose smile

you could see every day, whose fingers you could touch briefly as you exchanged your *sous* for her bread, and whose skirts swung just enough to reveal her ankles as she walked by. It was another to imagine her from a distance, without bringing her husband into the picture, when months could go by between sightings because you were in school or swimming in the river, or busy with some assigned task. As it was she came to church almost every second Sunday with her parents. Standing before the congregation, he had the privileged view of her married tongue reaching out for the host and the increasing recognition that she really was much older than an adolescent altar-boy whose chief duty after aiding the priest was to report the details of his advantaged position to his friends.

He knew the seminary was what was expected of him. Father Honoré had discussed the matter with his parents and seemed to take for granted his wish to attend. That was what altar-boys did if they were singled out by the priest. Although he helped his father in his workshop and had a certain talent with the carving tools, he didn't want to stay there. His father knew this and, given the conversations about the seminary, had recently brought in a young apprentice who could take over the business one day. Any disappointment was tempered by the expectation of a priest in the family and the social honour that went with that. His mother was especially pleased, and he overheard many exchanges with her acquaintances about his possible advancement in the church, "perhaps to a bishop one day!" All his friends were leaving school, if they had not already done so, ready to work for local farmers or the barrel-maker, anxious to make money, drink a lot of beer and wine, and court their former female schoolmates. They respected his opportunity to leave them behind, but wanted to make sure he wouldn't forget them.

"When you're some rich lady's personal confessor, Father, don't abandon us," one said with a grin. "We'll still need to talk to you about Eloise."

"Yes," another joined in," but at least our wives will satisfy us while you'll have to do with your hand!"

He laughed with them, aware that in more than this matter of physical satisfaction they might well have happier lives. Publicly, he was entering the seminary out of religious conviction, but privately his reasons were suspect—if the priesthood got him closer to God he might find reconciliation between deliverance from mortal limitations and guilty belief in their profound value.

In the summer after his final year of study at the town school, Father Honoré took him to Toulouse for an interview at the district seminary. The priests there were very kind and interested in his enthusiastic but simple readings of Aquinas. He tried to explain why he was attracted to the principles of natural law but soon realized his attachment to earthly experience was not theirs when it came to interpretations of divine matters. After this exchange, he helped his father in the shop, doing some basic carving that was beneath the now-practised apprentice, satisfied by the smooth scrape of his plane blade into the grain of pine board, and debating with himself the merits of the priests' arguments about the amounts of reason and faith that enabled one to know the existence of God.

It was the gypsies who found her. The town was on their annual route through the countryside, and every year they camped in an open field near the river and sold their goods at the morning market. Hand-stitched mats, carvings of birds and small animals, hammered silver necklaces, and bundles of herbs were on display, not to mention the skills of an aged fortune-teller who was very popular with newly-married couples eager for news about marital bliss and children. This year

there was something more, however. News that they had *une enfant sauvage* in their camp spread rapidly, and by early afternoon of the first day there was a line of people in the field waiting for a sight of the child who was kept locked in a wagon and would be brought out for those who paid three *sous* for the viewing. Philippe went along with his friends expecting to see a gypsy girl dressed in animal skins and making appropriate unintelligible noises for the crowd, a ruse that would be seen through by everyone but enjoyed just the same.

When he arrived in the field the line had become a three-deep semi-circle around a patch of trampled grass beside a colourfully-painted wagon. He dropped his coins into a battered hat held in the outstretched hand of a gypsy youth who was passing amongst the crowd. Some of the people were laughing and shouting as he strained to catch a glimpse of what must be the performing child, but there was also an undertone of restraint in others who remained strangely unanimated given such expected and paid-for entertainment. On the faces of more than a few he saw puzzlement and even occasionally a disturbance akin to fear. Separated from his friends by the crush of bodies, he pushed his way forward until he arrived, a little dishevelled and short of breath, at the inner edge of the throng.

Wiping the sweat from his brow he stared past the shoulder of a local vintner at a crouching, barefoot girl in a rough-cut jerkin that covered her torso but left her arms and most of her legs bare. Her unwashed hair hung down in thick matted locks over her shoulders, though the rest of her was surprisingly clean for a wild child. Her dark gypsy skin, burnished rather than weathered by sun and wind, glowed in contrast to the mottled forearms and craning necks of the farmers and other outdoor labourers.

She remained still, in a defensive posture that was nonetheless threatening despite the rope loosely strung around her waist and tied to the wheel of the

wagon. Her eyes were large and luminous as she stared back at the crowd, and if she understood any of the insults being her hurled at her by a group of youthful louts she gave no sign. Slowly she turned her head as if surveying each individual in front of her until her stare rested on Philippe, completely visible now because the vintner had stepped slightly aside to converse with a neighbour. He felt the weight of that gaze and sensed it came from more than the usual strangeness of gypsy experience. There was something in it beyond the immediately human, yet it was still human and not to be dismissed as simply untamed or uncivilized. But if she was more than a gypsy who was she then, and where had she come from?

"Do something!" one youth shouted. "We didn't pay three *sous* for you just to sit there." He turned to an old gypsy woman, the fortune-teller, who was sitting on the steps of the wagon. "Give a pull on that rope," he told her. "Make her pay for her keep."

The old woman shook her head and said something in her native tongue. Then she stood and held up her hand to quiet the crowd.

"This child listens only to the voices inside her," she said in French. "You could drag her over the ground with the rope and she still would not give you what you wanted."

"Here, let me try," a burly young farmhand declared. He stepped forward and reached for the length of rope extending from the knot by her waist. Before he touched it, the child leapt onto his bent shoulders and began ripping at his shirt and skin with her long fingernails. He screamed in pain and threw her off but not before the blood was flowing from deep scratches on his upper back and neck. The crowd drew back and the epithets flew, some directed at the young man for his foolishness but more condemning the savagery of the child who, breathing heavily, almost panting, Philippe noted, had taken up the same defensive pose as before.

“She should be in a cage,” one woman cried.

“Strung up by that same rope, more like,” someone else yelled.

The town’s mayor stepped forward and turned to face them, holding up his hands. “There’ll be no more such talk, “he said. “We are the civilized ones here, are we not?” His assertive question quieted even the louts, several of whom were busy attending to their injured friend. “I think,” he said to the old woman, you should tie her feet so she cannot move like that again.” The fortune-teller did not reply, but nodded slightly and, climbing down from her perch, untied the rope so the child could be lifted from her crouch and led up the steps into the wagon.

`Neither I, nor the council, nor, I might add, the constabulary will allow a repeat of such behaviour as we have just witnessed. From now on, if the child is made visible, no more than ten people may come to this field at a time and only then for a short period of viewing. Notices will be posted to that effect.” He took his gold watch from his vest pocket. “That is the end of today’s visitations,” he declared. “I will speak with the gypsies and make sure everything is in order for tomorrow.” He strode through the parted crowd, and after a few moments the disgruntled and placated followed him back to the town.

Philippe rejoined his friends who were talking animatedly about the untamed girl and her attack on the farmhand. “I would have kicked her first,” said one, and the others laughed. “Not me,” said another. “I would have thrown her a piece of meat before I went near!”

Philippe surprised them when he spoke. “She’s not like that,” he said quietly. “She was afraid. Any one of us would have acted the same way.”

“Any one of us would not have to be tied like that in the first place,” the kicker stated confidently.

"Perhaps not, but just ask yourself how you would feel being paraded like that in front of strangers you didn't understand."

"What do you mean, Philippe? She may be a gypsy but she speaks French, I'm sure."

He remembered those shining eyes and the hard stare. "I don't know if she is a gypsy," he said.

The would-be kicker scoffed. "You mean she really is *une enfant sauvage*?" They don't exist, Philippe. How could anyone survive like that? Out there with the animals and all kinds of weather," he added, throwing his arm out in the rough direction of the local hills and, far beyond them, the invisible Pyrenees. He raised his voice, confident of the points he was making. "And what about her wild parents and all her aunts and uncles? Where are they hiding? Or do the gypsies pay them to stay out of sight and rent their child for a while?"

The others laughed, and even Philippe smiled as if to acknowledge the credibility of his friend's argument. He hadn't thought of the child's origins, feeling only that her gaze was unique when it passed over him, and now he had to admit he had no answers to all these valid questions.

His parents hadn't gone to the field, but listened with great interest to his description of the events.

"It's very sad," his mother said. "That child deserves better treatment from her family. But, after all, they are gypsies, aren't they?"

"I remember another *enfant sauvage* when I was a boy," his father said. He was treated even worse than what happened today. The gypsies were ordered by Napoleon's soldiers, on pain of arrest, to take him away." He shook his head.

"People in those days were much more superstitious, and they believed the child was the devil's spawn."

"Did you think he was, *papa*?"

"Oh, no. He was just a gypsy boy dressed up to look the part. But even so..." His voice trailed away.

"Even so?"

His father paused for a few moments before replying. "The part was very convincing. When he was led away from the crowd, I heard a gypsy woman speak softly to him in her language, words clearly intended for his ears only. The boy only growled in response. I was frightened by that."

The next morning Philippe went to the church to speak with Father Honoré. The priest had been busy with church duties, but said he would not have gone to the field anyway. "God's flock cannot think of Him all the time," he said. "They need distractions from their daily toil, and the gypsies, an ungodly people, provide some of these."

"Why do you call them ungodly?" Philippe asked politely.

The priest's voice rose a little. "They depend on superstition and spells," he said. "They do not attend church and, as far as I can tell, they worship a dark being more akin to the fallen angel than to our Lord."

Philippe thought of the devil's spawn his father had mentioned. "What about the child herself, Father? Surely she is not responsible for her condition. Especially if she is not a gypsy."

"Oh, I am sure she is a gypsy. But even if she were a true *enfant sauvage*, she would be damned."

Letting the question go for a moment, Philippe excitedly asked, "So there are true wild children out there, and their families?"

"God's creation is abundant and mysterious, Philippe. You and I cannot say what we are certain exists on this earth and what does not."

"But that would make them almost like Adam and Eve in their innocent state in the garden. Wouldn't that mean they weren't ungodly?" He had wanted to use the word 'holy' rather than define them negatively, but sensed it would have been gravely offensive to Father Honoré

Even so the priest looked at him, alarmed. "Eden was sacrosanct ground, Philippe. The wilderness beyond our town is certainly not that. The animals that live there have no souls. Nor do any people who dwell among them." Father Honoré's hand was on his shoulder. "You should not become preoccupied with what the gypsies bring us. There is nothing to be done for them or that child. I will speak to the mayor about forcing them to move on. It will be better for the congregation."

"But that's what happened when my father was a boy! Another *enfant sauvage* was called the devil's child and made to leave by Napoleon's men."

"Napoleon was a heretic who set himself up as an emperor before God, but in that case I would have to agree with his soldiers. As for the Church, it puts up with the distractions of the tavern and sins of the flesh because these can be forgiven. But the absence of a Christian soul cannot be tolerated nor the empty body redeemed. Forget this matter, Philippe. You have more important things to think about." He smiled beneficently. "I was going to come to your house today to share the good news with your parents. I have heard from the bishop in Toulouse. You have been accepted into the seminary."

The next day was Sunday, and after the Mass the priest made an announcement about Philippe's future. Everyone was as proud as his parents had been when he had told them the evening before. The townsfolk crowded around him, slapping his

back and shaking his hand. One of theirs was going to the seminary in Toulouse. It wouldn't be long before he had his own parish! For the more educated, like the doctor and *avocat*, there were greater possibilities to consider, though they were wise enough to know that small-town boys did not usually become bishops or cardinals. Because the tavern was closed, Philippe was toasted with good red wine in many a kitchen and supplanted the wild child as a topic of conversation until the new week began.

On the Monday morning a small crowd of those who were not tied down to specific hours of work gathered in the field near the gypsy wagon. The bantering housewives said they could spare an hour, no more, but the old men and women were prepared for a somewhat longer stay. The town layabouts felt they could hang around all day, apart from brief breaks at the tavern. Then the mayor's clerk turned up to remind them that only ten people at a time could view the *enfant sauvage* and because there would eventually be a line-up—for example the schoolchildren were coming at noon—everyone would have to wait patiently at the edge of the field. Depending on the demand, the clerk said, viewing times would be restricted. Had he been alone, some of the layabouts would no doubt have shouted him down, but he was accompanied by the large, red-faced town constable who made a point of writing things in a small notebook as the clerk spoke.

There really wasn't too much concern in the would-be spectators as long as the wild child entertained them rather than simply sat there under the eye of the old gypsy woman. Surely they were entitled to a performance of some kind. If she didn't want to dance, then maybe she would be made to speak in whatever language she possessed or at least growl under a bit of prodding. Maybe the old woman would tell them where she had been found and captured, something of her

habits—what she ate and so on. Someone suggested she be muzzled and held tightly so they could step in close and touch her, though of course they didn't want to catch any disease, and the pestilence she might carry in those scruffy locks of hair couldn't be known.

But they were to be disappointed. The constable counted off the ten bodies who paid their *sous* to the same youth and were allowed to go forward and wait by the wagon. Soon after the old woman brought out the child without a rope around her waist but hobbled to prevent her from moving with any speed. Once lifted to the ground, she crouched down much as she had done the day before. Then the old woman returned to the wagon steps where she sat and spread her black dress out like a fan so that only the tips of her boots were visible.

"Well, if she's not going to do anything, will you answer our questions?" a housewife yelled.

The gypsy considered this for a moment and nodded that she would.

"How do we know she's what you say?" a layabout demanded.

The old woman spat in the dust and did not reply. Instead she took out a small wooden pipe, banged out the old ashes against the top step and proceeded to plug in new tobacco.

"Where did you find her, then?" the same housewife asked, lowering her voice a little as if in hope that some politeness would yield a spout of information.

"Where they are always found. In the hills under the high mountains."

"Did she put up a fight?"

"She ran, but we were too many. She bit and clawed until she was tied."

"Does she talk," another idler shouted out as if genuinely interested, though some thought it a surprising question from one whose vocabulary was usually limited to curse-words and complaints about the price of beer and wine.

The old woman, not immediately inclined to respond, puffed on her pipe. Then she said, “She has her own words that she speaks to herself, but she is not used to speaking with others. Mostly she growls and grunts tell us her feelings. As for her thoughts, they cannot belong to us.”

“Prod her with a stick, then,” the same man said, “and make her growl.”

The gypsy blew some foul-smelling smoke in his direction. “You prod her,” she said, chuckling at the prospect.

Then it was time for the next group, and soon after that the schoolchildren arrived. The mayor’s clerk was under instructions not let them too close but to allow them a bit longer period with the child. “It will do them good to see the consequences of not being civilized,” he said. The children lined up, wide-eyed but unafraid of someone their own size and tied besides. Several of their questions showed a sensitivity and thoughtfulness the adults had lacked. ‘Where did you find her’ became ‘Where does she live?’ and ‘Did she put up a fight?’ was replaced by ‘Was she scared of you?’ To the first the gypsy replied with the same answer she had provided earlier, but to the second she gave a more detailed response.

“Yes, she was frightened. She is like any creature you trap and try to tame. But she is a child, like you, so her fear was greater.” She gestured toward them with her pipe. “Think how you would feel if a band of strangers surrounded you and tied you up, then took you away from your home and everything you knew.”

One little girl spoke so quietly that the old woman cupped her hand to her ear. “What’s that you say?”

The girl stepped forward to the front of the group and squatted down to the level of the wild child. They were only a few yards apart, and while the contrast of physical appearance and dress couldn’t have been stronger, an objective observer,

perhaps someone painting the scene, would have noticed a shared tilt of the head and pearl-black flash in each pair of eyes. “Why did you trap her, *Madame*?”

The truth of it was, of course, that the gypsies saw the wild child as an opportunity to add some coins to their meagre coffers. They had shown her on their trail through other towns and villages for a few weeks now, and they would continue to display her as they progressed through the southern half of the country before settling down in their permanent fall and winter quarters where the Mediterranean lapped the shores of the French and Spanish borders. Had the adults still been in front of her, the old woman would probably have thrown back at them their own desire to make money. But she knew these children were as yet without guile or greed, traits that drove her own tribe as much as the townspeople. Most of all, they had no expectations of the *enfant sauvage* and would make no demands that she dance to their tune. So she gave the girl’s question the serious answer it deserved. “She is one of us, *ma petite*.” She raised her arm with the pipe extended in their direction so they understood they were included in her claim. “And we are more like her than we care to admit.”

Although the little girl could not have entirely understood the implications of this connection, her next question caused the old gypsy to wonder, not for the first time, at the ability of children to close the distance between words and their meanings. “Will you set her free?” she asked softly.

Just then, the clerk came up behind the group of children and began hustling them away. “Time to go, time to go, your teacher is waiting.”

The old woman beckoned to the little girl who began to walk in a wide circle to reach the wagon steps. “No,” the gypsy said, “she will not hurt *you*.”

The girl stopped and looked at the still-crouching wild child. As she took one tentative step toward her, the clerk swooped in and lifted her off her feet. “What do

you think you're doing?" he yelled at the old woman. "Do you want her to be killed? Another trick like that, Madame, and I'll have you arrested!"

She bowed slightly from the waist, but smiled down at him through a cloud of pipe-smoke.

Philippe came to the gypsy camp that evening. The mayor, despite Father Honoré's concerns, was not yet ready to order the gypsies to move on, but to mollify the priest he had announced there would be no late viewings, stating that those fuelled by too much tavern talk and consumption would be kept under control. A constable's man was on duty where the town road passed the field, but he did not object when Philippe indicated he wished to speak with the old woman. After all, he was an acolyte of Father Honoré and had been accepted to the seminary.

All day Philippe had worried over the priest's response to the wild child. God's servant on earth had put her on the level of an animal without a soul and had adamantly said that she and the gypsies were damned. Despite the rope, it was very clear that the old woman cared for the child, but Philippe supposed the devil could work in devious ways and wanted to assure himself, as much as was possible, that her nurture was not feigned. As for the child herself, while he knew he could not communicate with her, he thought perhaps some time in her presence, uninterrupted by the agitations of his fellow citizens, might clarify a little the issue of her soul.

Of course, he was not yet a priest through whom God would eventually speak, but individual spirituality for him had always been based on one's goodness if not complete obedience to the Lord's will and way. If the *enfant sauvage* had not heard of God did that mean she could not be saved? Father Honoré certainly seemed to

say it was so. Whatever his sense of the rightness of his mission, however, he felt more and more confused as he walked across the field toward the camp. If the devil was at work, how was he to believe that any of his judgements about the child would be valid? And even supposing her goodness was irrefutable, what could he do?

He knocked on the side of the wagon and heard a shuffling inside before the old woman opened the door at the head of the steps.

Standing above him in the near-dark, her black dress and headscarf adding to her obscurity, she seemed a threatening figure. But the harshness of her first words was complicated by Philippe's sense that she expected more than a safe and predictable response to her question.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

The consequence was his voice began to shake as he identified himself and tried to explain why, as a prospective seminary student, he was disturbed by his priest's condemnation of her and the child. "When I saw her yesterday," he said, "she was nothing but one of God's children."

The old woman laughed. "Given your priest's views I am not certain she would like to be included in his flock. As for me, I have seen the shepherd's crook wielded as a weapon too many times. But I think you must make up your own mind about such matters. Come!"

It was more of a command than a welcome, but Philippe climbed the steps and, bending his head, entered another world for the first time. The door shut behind him and it took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the light offered by a single candle burning on a low table. Brightly-coloured rugs stitched with intricate designs decorated the interior walls, and a single red and black rug covered the floor from end to end. There was a pile of blankets in one corner and two small

stools beside the table. The air was close and he thought he could smell the child who could only be beneath the blankets, but the scent of unseen plants or herbs was even stronger, not to mention the smoke wafting from the pipe the old woman now puffed on. She motioned him to one of the stools and sat on the other, their feet almost touching.

"You are not certain about the seminary," she said.

Shocked that she would presume to know his inmost thoughts and feelings, and angry she had articulated what he had barely admitted to himself since his exchange with the priest, he tried to evade her audacity.

"It is not me I wish to discuss, Madame, but the child."

"Of course, but your search for her soul is because your own is troubled. You have just discovered that your God is not all-merciful and does not suffer all little children to come unto him."

"You've read the Bible!"

"Yes, and much else besides. The damned do many things to keep the final fires at bay."

He could find no trace of irony in her voice, but reminded himself of the devil's disguises.

"If you have read the Holy Scriptures, how can you not believe?"

"Who says I do not? The difference between your priest and me is that knowledge of your holy book does not prevent belief in many other things. Have you read the Koran?"

"No, but I know it exists. Father Honoré says it is blasphemous."

"I am not surprised. I am sure he has also told you we gypsies are heathens who have only superstition to nourish us and spells we weave around innocent Christians."

"He warned me of your false notions, but I don't believe in the power of spells."

"Then you are foolish as well as uncertain."

She turned to the pile of blankets and said a few words in her strange tongue. The pile stirred and Philippe saw the tangled mat of hair emerge and then the dusky limbs of the child whose eyes reflected the candle light as if it were a tiny sun burning for eternity. There was no rope around her waist or ankles.

The old woman gestured for the child to sit beside her, and he watched her crawl confidently to the side of the stool, her eyes never shifting from his own, her jerkin a smooth second skin fitted to the rhythms of her moving body. He shook his head to relieve the hypnotic effect and said bravely, "Is this one of your spells?"

The old woman put her arm around the child's shoulder and smiled. "Only if you wish it to be."

They sat there in the semi-darkness, and as he wondered if there was any way to promote a direct exchange with the child, the old woman began to sing a song in her gypsy language that he could not, of course, comprehend but which brought him close to tears with its beautiful cadences and tones of pathos. It was like a hymn, he thought, and he pictured her by the altar, her voice filling the nave and transept, rolling out over the congregation, transforming their faith. He saw the child watching her now, not him, and realized the strength of the bond between them.

When she had finished he asked her what the song was about.

"It is the story of a man's search for something he can measure against death," she said. "Not in an afterlife, but here on earth."

"Does he find it?"

"The song is what he finds," she replied. "He lives forever in the song."

He did not know what to say.

"One day, perhaps, you will understand. She understands," she said, nodding at the child beside her. "She has lived a long time on this earth."

"What do you mean?"

"Come back tomorrow night and she will tell you."

He walked home slowly across the field and into the town. A few revellers were still in the tavern behind the lighted window, but otherwise the streets were quiet. He puzzled over what he had seen and heard in the wagon. How could the child tell him anything? How was there such room for her and the old woman in the seminary of his mind?

The next day he worked with his father in the shop. The smell of the wood shavings and linseed oil combined with the sunlight stippling the workbench and floor heightened his senses and prompted his attention to the smallest of movements in his father's skilled hands. He watched him delicately curl the edge of a chisel blade around the button-shaped handle of a drawer and then create an intricate pattern of lines in the perfect circle. It was his job to sand the result lightly and add the oil with a fine-haired brush. He could never match his father's accomplishments, but he could admire them without question. While reaching for the brush he realized this simple round knob could indeed be measured against death. Long after his father was gone it would still be in service and an object of regard on the esteemed cabinet in someone's home. Given the inevitable decay of wood, his father might not live forever in such earthly expression, but he would survive for perhaps hundreds of years. The wood was his equivalent of the gypsy

song. Philippe watched the individual hairs of his brush spread out beneath the weight of the oil. Each stroke mattered in ways he hadn't noticed before.

That evening the constable's man at the field's edge told him there had been a large crowd of visitors by the afternoon because many people had journeyed from other villages and outlying farms, afraid the gypsies' trek with the *enfant sauvage* would miss them altogether. They had been orderly, and to accommodate them all the mayor had allowed two dozen visitors at a time. A small stand selling bread and wine had been set up, one glass per customer. The bread was fresh and the wine not at all bad, the man said.

Philippe approached the wagon and noticed for the first time what looked to be a small painted cross tilted at a slight angle to the side of the steps. At second glance it could be a tiny human stick figure. Had it always been there or had the gypsy woman placed it there since his last visit as a sign that had to do with the ambivalence of his own Christianity? No, of course she hadn't. She knew nothing of Aquinas. Regardless, she always seemed to be one step ahead of him, and he was determined not to mention the intersecting lines of paint.

His knock gained him entry and he was motioned to the same stool by the old woman with her pipe clenched between her teeth and one hand stroking the hair of the untethered wild child. Several candles burned on shelves above the table, which was empty except for two half-filled cups of wine. Sip slowly, he told himself. No spells tonight.

"We will be leaving soon," she said.

"Leaving? Why? There are still many people to see the child."

"It is time. And the child has seen enough of them."

It was a curious way of putting it, as if the child wasn't tired of her visitors but had taken from them what she needed.

"When will you go?"

"In a day or two. You have not yet found what you came to seek."

"No, but I learned something from that song you sang last night."

"Yes?"

He told her of his vision of his father's immortality that morning in the workshop. "No, 'immortality' is not the right word. I mean his way, as you said, of measuring up against death. A way that somehow includes us all. The ones who make the knobs and the ones who use them later on."

The old woman turned and took something from the shelf behind her. "Can you draw, son of a cabinet-maker?" she said, handing him paper and pencil.

"Yes, a little." What trick was this?

"Good, then draw anything you like, perhaps a farm animal will do. A horse or cow."

Philippe held the pencil and saw the child was watching him closely. He made a quick sketch of a Percheron, complete with shaggy mane and outsize hooves, a working-man's horse rather than fancy stallion.

The old woman took the picture from him and set it down on the table. Then she took the pencil from his hand and gave it to the child. Philippe watched as the *enfant sauvage* drew something rapidly but at the same time with great care. He couldn't make sense of the lines in the candlelight. The child put down the pencil and smiled up at the old woman who lifted the paper and handed it to Philippe. He gazed in astonishment at the perfect image of a reindeer.

"My God!" he exclaimed, filled with so many questions he hardly knew where to start.

The old woman took back the paper and gave it to the child who began to draw again. The lowered rack of horns and the musculature of the legs and chest were etched on his retina.

"How can she do this?" he said, pointing at the child and her continuing efforts. "Where would she see such an animal?" He himself, of course, had seen reindeer only in schoolbooks. He knew they lived in the far north of countries like Sweden and Finland in an area called Lapland. Is that where the child was from? She was no more than eight or nine years old. How had she traveled down to France and where were those who must have brought her here?

The gypsy seemed to read his thoughts. "I am sure she has lived in France all her young life. There is too much civilization between here and the usual country of this animal for any such as her to make the journey."

"But there are no reindeer in France!"

"You are right, Philippe. Not even in the high Pyrenees."

"She has seen a book, then."

"It is possible, but you must ask yourself how that would happen."

"So where has this drawing come from?"

The old woman watched the child for a few moments then picked up the paper again, turning it toward him. This time he saw a mother reindeer with her calf standing beside the male and a herd of the creatures behind them against a backdrop of hills. In contrast to his excitement about the impossible subject, he only now admired the fineness of the lines that captured the animals' strength and beauty. What confidence she had to portray their grace and composure in their natural habitat! It wasn't just a matter of where she had seen reindeer but how she was able to draw like this.

"Did you teach her?" he asked loudly, suddenly suspicious of the situation in which he found himself. Was this a gypsy dodge to make money from the gullible folk who would buy such a picture in a flash? Had the old woman heard of Father Honoré's opposition to the display of the child and to the camp in general and so was seeking a way to win over the mayor and his followers?

"I have many skills," she replied, but drawing like this is not one of them. No, I did not teach her. This," she pointed at the drawing, "comes from inside her."

"Can I have it?" he heard himself say greedily.

She handed him the paper. "But do not show it to anyone else."

"Why on earth not?" he said in surprise, forgetting his worries about the dodge. "She could be famous all over France, not just because she is *une enfant sauvage* but because she can draw much better than most schoolchildren, or even adults for that matter."

"Perhaps, but I do not think she wants to be famous." She looked down at the child who was making lines with the pencil on the dark grain of the table. "I will let her tell you why." She took the piece of paper from his resistant fingers and gave it back to the girl. Philippe moved his stool around so he could watch over her shoulder, doing so very slowly and carefully because she was not tied in any way. But the child seemed lost in her task and unconcerned by his proximity. He could smell her hair and skin, and couldn't understand their pleasant scent until he saw the necklace of herbs around her neck. When she had finished making her marks to the right of the reindeer on the page, she put down the pencil and stared up at him, baring her teeth a little in a grin of almost friendly regard, though he sensed it was also meant as a warning.

What he saw now was a high rock behind which crouched two large, predatory cats, fierce animals that still lived in the Pyrenees, venturing down sometimes to

the farms in the lower hills in search of sheep and goats. They were clearly hunting the reindeer and not far from pouncing on the herd. It was curious because while the drawing was filled with the tension between the reindeers' tranquility and the coming slaughter of the innocents, there was a quality in it that held the opposing ways of life in everlasting suspension. He felt the cats would always crouch there and the reindeer nibble on the stalks of grass she had drawn at their feet. Nothing would change, though the longer one stared at the animals the more intense the anticipation of violence became.

He had seen only a few reproductions of paintings by famous artists, each of them religious, but they all prompted that same insistent sense of the eternal, a feeling that while the world and its citizens were caught in the unstoppable passing of moments, ennobling and destructive by turns, but merciless in their onward sweep, the vision of a *pietà* or of God's finger reaching out to Adam's quieted the tumultuous rush of existence toward its mortal end and promised unchangeable Heaven. The difference was this child's drawing promised the earth and its denizens would last forever, a sinful contemplation. It was a heathen vision, yet he didn't want it to disappear.

"In the evening tomorrow," the old woman told him, "she will finish the drawing and then you may have it."

All the next day he wondered about what he had seen. The wild child had more behind her eyes than anyone, including Father Honoré, could conceive. Alright, perhaps she would not want sudden fame and exposure, he could understand that, but surely she deserved more than a roped life in a gypsy camp. How she would thrive, he thought, if she went to school and then to Toulouse or Paris to draw subjects other than animals. It was clear that her ability with a pencil, however

extraordinary, was severely restricted by her life in the wilderness, though he still could not explain where she had seen the reindeer in order to draw them so accurately. But if other subjects, like church architecture and religious icons were put before her over time, and paint brushes replaced the pencil, then perhaps she could become an artist of note who could control her own public as well as private destiny.

On the other hand, though, there was the old woman's protective affection for the girl and refusal to take advantage of her talent. He was amazed the drawings hadn't been part of the child's presentation to the town crowds. Clearly there was a gypsy respect for what came from "inside her" and no desire to have it produced on demand. He thought of what the priest had said about her soul-less condition. If this was so, how then could her drawing ability be a gift from God? But what if the drawing proved that she was no animal and that God had not turned His back on her? That might be the way to join the gypsy belief about the origins of her work to the priest's assumptions about the mysterious ways of the Lord. He was nagged by the old woman's demand of secrecy and her strong suggestion of the child's preference for this, but surely what the wild artist was doing was miraculous, and any miracle should be put to the test of attention and belief.

That evening he went once more to the wagon. Beyond it at the edge of the wood that skirted the river, there was a roaring fire and he could see figures dancing amidst much music and singing. When the old woman answered his knock, she explained it was a celebration to mark their moving on.

"We touch the earth with our feet and the air with our voices so they will remember us when we pass this way again," she said.

The child was waiting for him. That was how he felt when he saw her by the table, pencil in hand and the same sheet of paper in front of her. She gave him her

grin and this time he smiled back, hoping that she might trust him even while he was aware from the gypsy's ensuing question that she did not.

"What have you been thinking since we last met?" the old woman asked, pouring a dark, strong-smelling tea into two small cups.

"Nothing," he lied, a little too quickly, and then because he realized the absurdity of pretending an empty head before the marvels she had provided, he stumbled on. "Nothing and everything, that is. I've been so overwhelmed that, for sanity's sake, my thoughts have in the last while shut themselves down. I don't know what to think anymore, *Madame*."

She studied him until he began to feel uncomfortable, as if she knew of his half-formed ideas to help the child. He had formulated no plans except, of course, to make sure he got his hands on the drawing. Once he held the marvel in his hands away from the old woman's scrutiny, he would know what to do.

"Perhaps it is so," she said eventually. "But you are troubled within. Listen to me, my son. This child is powerful in ways you do not suspect. I am not speaking of her sharp nails and strength that would make it impossible to subdue her by yourself, but of something more, a power that is older than anything in your experience, including your worshipped god with his rules and unforgiving nature. As for the one you call his son, he was more of a gypsy than you would be able to admit and paid a gypsy price for his doings in the end. No, what this child draws from deep inside her goes back far beyond your holy book and its words. She touches a time before we decided we could invent gods as our companions and stories to keep us safe. Only if we leave that time alone will we learn from it. Only if she is allowed to draw what she sees and not what others see for her will we be worthy of what she gives us."

All this time the child's pencil had been moving over the paper. When it stopped the old woman gave the drawing to Philippe. Despite his preconceptions of the miraculous, he gasped at what he now saw.

By a tree below the cats, larger than the rock to show it is closer to the artist`s eye, is a giant, shaggy mammoth complete with curving tusks and, amazingly, two trunks, one probing the grass at its feet and the other curling the delicate blades upward. When Philippe blinks it seems as if there is one trunk moving in a blur from ground to mouth. There are also two sets of front legs, one pair planted firmly by the tree and the other turning around with the same blurred effect. His eye follows a trampled path of grass toward the outlines of a river not far away. The rippling pencil lines suggest a wind-blown current and there, just beneath the surface, is the face of another mammoth looking up out of the water like the reflection of an animal that should be standing above it. He can see the footprints of the absent land beast in the mud or dirt by the water. All of this is more than enough to prove God`s presence in the drawing. She has not seen this creature from so long ago in any Lapland region and certainly not in the wilds of France. It can only have entered her mind divinely. It is the Lord`s hand that has done this, not hers.

But this certainty is troubled by the other creature she has never seen. There in the front centre of the drawing, dancing as if weightless above the dusty earth, the dark shadings on its hump and belly suggestive of flowing colours, blacks and reds and blues perhaps, is a bison so near the eye of the beholder that it dwarfs the mammoth to its side. The size and evident strength of the animal together with the details of its body and posture cannot be ignored. But what holds and disturbs Philippe as no other visual image has ever done, what takes him past his Christian

explanations of the child`s talent, is the visage of the beast turned toward him. It is a human face, the face of a girl whose eyes look into his through a time left alone longer than he has ever imagined.

It is not a self-portrait of the *enfant sauvage* though shewould not need a mirror to provide one. A pool of water would sufficiently reveal her features to herself. This face belongs to another, and placed where it is Philippe knows it is special. The girl is older than the artist by five or six years and there is something less feral about her as if she would be comfortable hunting with others as well as alone. Of course he is assuming she is not the daughter of a landowner in the Pyrenees foothills, frozen in the moonlight by the wild child while stealing chickens or eggs or prowling for larger domestic prey. That is possible, but he prefers her direct connection with the ancient animals that surround her in the drawing and especially the one in whose body she dwells. Thick hair tumbles past her shoulders like a dark waterfall, covering all but the tips of her ears. Her nose is small and straight between two prominent cheekbones, and there is a small scar line on her strong chin. Her mouth is closed so he cannot see her teeth, but in the curving lines of her lips there is the suggestion of a faint quiver as if she is about to smile or speak.

He marvels at her eyes, somehow both human and animal, that show the girl at once inhabits and is inhabited by the bison, stronger than the great beast but unable to express that strength without its help. More than anything else, this sense of her duality emphasizes to him that, unlike the wild child, she has actually seen the reindeer, the mammoth, and the bison for herself, has walked among them and survived. Her gaze is ancient, yet held in the drawing it is also ageless, and he is troubled by the implications.

There is no mention in the Book of Genesis of such beasts in Eden, and the only half-man, half-animal story he knows is the myth of the minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth, a creature of Satan according to Father Honoré, a damned beast that the great poet Dante consigned to the seventh circle of Hell. But the child has not drawn the human face in the body of the bison to provoke condemnation. What he sees in the pencilled eyes is a sense of peace and accomplishment that biblical texts and descents into infernos seem unable to gauge. When he hands the child the paper he watches her hand rush across the top, swiftly filling the sky above the animals with flocks of birds, so many they almost block out the ragged sun she has drawn beside mountainous black clouds of impending rain. Suddenly he realizes he is not witness to the uninhibited spontaneity of art. There is too much speed here, too much predestination for the pencil. The wild child may be gifted, but he is almost certain now she is making a copy of another's work. He points to the face of the bison. Aloud he says, "It is not hers, but it is a self-portrait."

Either the old woman did not hear him or chose not to. She refilled his cup he did not know he had emptied and lit her pipe. The child curled up at her feet and closed her eyes in sleep.

"Where did you find her exactly?" he asked.

"In the foothills many days south of here. It was hard to say whether she was climbing up or down. When she saw us coming she ran wherever the ground allowed her."

"She must live up in the mountains, probably in a cave, don't you think? And that's where the rest of her family might be." For a few moments he kept silent, wondering how she would react to what he was about to say. For all of the gypsy's obvious affection for the vulnerable child, the *enfant sauvage* was a money-maker

for her and the camp. She had only shared this remarkable talent with him to challenge the religious strictures she did not accept, not because he was supposed to confront the imprisoned artist's situation. Nevertheless, he decided to do just that. "I think you should let her go," he said.

The gypsy looked at him through the thin wisps of smoke swirling from the pipe. "Is it for her sake or your own?"

He took a long swallow of tea to hide his nervousness. It was true he was not thinking of the child's welfare but of his desire to follow her home, to find that original drawing he was sure existed, to see that self-portrait for himself. "I just think she should be free," he said at last.

The old woman said nothing in reply. They sat for several minutes in silence. The pipe-smoke drifted through the wagon, the tea grew cold, the child stirred in her sleep. Finally he picked up the drawing. "May I still have this?" he asked anxiously, as if without it he would have no map to follow into a future now uncertain for himself whether the child was released or not.

"Yes, Philippe. Though you must still promise to show it to no one. Her freedom does not depend on what others might think best for her."

With the drawing firmly in hand, he took courage. "Including yourself, *Madame*?"

"Perhaps myself most of all."

The next morning he went to the church to ask the priest's advice. He had no intention of revealing the drawing but wanted the comfort of a Christian frame around the matter of the child's freedom. Father Honoré was in the sacristy folding sacred vestments that had already been neatly arranged after the last mass, singing softly to himself the Gospel Acclamation, his voice rising slightly on the Alleluia.

"Ah, Philippe," he said, "I am happy to see you, given your interest in the issue of the *enfant sauvage*."

"Yes, Father, what is it?" he replied, pleased that the priest had introduced the subject.

"I have spoken with the mayor and his council, and we have decided to place the child in the sisters' orphanage in Toulouse."

"What!" he shouted.

"Keep your voice down in this of all places," the priest said disapprovingly. "The child cannot stay in that heathen camp. She deserves the opportunity to come to the Lord."

"But you said she was damned!"

"Yes, I did. But that is from her ignorance not her sinful actions. 'With everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.'"

"She won't survive in an orphanage, Father. She is meant to be free in the mountains she knows so well."

Shocked by such resistance and presumption, the priest spoke sternly to his former altar-boy. "And who are you to know what she knows so well?"

"Look, Father. I'll prove it to you." He took the drawing from his jacket pocket and unfolded the paper on a silk chasuble reserved for Christmas and Easter celebrations. "See what she has done!"

As he pressed the paper flat and surveyed the images the priest's hands began to shake. "This is idolatry," he declared, pressing a fingertip against the girl's face on the bison. His face red, he turned to Philippe. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"I told you. The wild child drew it herself! But I think it is a copy. I think the original drawing exists somewhere in the mountains, where she lives."

"It is idolatry and blasphemy! The sooner she is in the orphanage the better for whatever soul she has left!"

"But, Father, you said she was without a soul."

"I will not tolerate any dissent! As for this"—he ripped the paper in two pieces and then in four, balling the remnants between his palms before Philippe could react—"it has no place in this world or the next."

His voice strangling in his throat, Philippe tried unsuccessfully to tear the paper from the priest's hands. "You had no right, you had no right!" he shouted.

Father Honoré gathered himself. Anger in defence of the Church was one thing, but outrage expressed at an acolyte meant loss of personal authority based on what must remain an unassailable hierarchy. "You will leave here immediately and never speak of this matter again, Philippe. The child will be taken away from the gypsies this afternoon and that will be an end to it."

Head bowed, his lips pressed tightly together against further denunciations that might spill from them, Philippe left the sacristy. Passing the crucified Christ above the altar, he looked up at a painted face that was no longer constant.

Trying to think of a solution as he ran toward the gypsy camp, he could not quell his outrage at the priest. The drawing had been torn and crushed without a thought for its extraordinary qualities. Father Honoré had not stopped to consider the implications of what the child had done. But the drawing's meaning and fate were no longer his chief concern. The child would die in an orphanage, whatever God's mercies. She must be saved in a different way, and he realized now that only the old woman could protect her.

He raced across the field and pounded on the side of the wagon. "*Madame, Madame*," he cried, "the child is in danger. You must hurry!"

The old woman opened the door and stared down at his dishevelled state. “Be calm, my son,” she said. “Tell me what has happened.”

“The priest and mayor have decided the *enfant sauvage* must go into an orphanage. They are coming for her this afternoon!”

The gypsy glanced back into the wagon. “She is sleeping now. But I will tell the others to get ready. We will leave by mid-day.”

“No!” he yelled. “The constable and his men will follow you and your wagons are too slow. If you run that way they will surely capture the child and arrest you for defying the law.”

“What must we do, then, Philippe?”

He leaned his head against the cool, shaded side of the wagon and gripped the top of a wheel with both hands, his thoughts churning in a desperate vortex. Then he looked up. “We must hide her,” he announced, “and get her away in the night. Listen, there is an old boathouse by the river that no one uses any more. If we go to the far side of your camp we can follow the riverbank in the shelter of the trees. You wait there with her and when it’s dark I’ll row you downstream to where someone can meet you with a horse. Meanwhile, the others should take your wagon with them when they leave in another direction entirely.”

“It will not be easy for you if the priest discovers what you have done.”

“Damn the priest!” he murmured under his breath. She could not have heard him, but he saw her nod as if in agreement. “I’ll deal with that later,” he said loudly. “Wake the child, bring some food and a blanket. We must go now.” For the first time he looked back over his shoulder toward the town. There was no sign of any activity, except for a few people strolling casually toward the edge of the field. He moved quickly around to the other side of the wagon so as not to be seen.

The wagon door opened outward and hid the old woman and child from prying eyes as they emerged a few moments later, the girl moving slowly as if lost in a dream of sleep and the gypsy carrying a blanket folded to contain their provisions. The three of them walked quickly to another wagon where the old woman spoke rapidly to a bearded man and his female companion. Their gaze gave little away, but he could feel their assessment of him nonetheless and was relieved when the man put his hand on his shoulder and seemed to speak kindly to him.

"He says you are brave to help a gypsy."

"Does that mean the child is a gypsy?" he asked.

The old woman smiled grimly. "Today she is."

The moved into the trees by the water and trekked to the west, staying close to the river's curves until, after ten minutes or so, they came to a straight stretch stirred by the breeze. The far bank was covered in long grass glistening in the morning sun, but on their side was a long, narrow wharf with thick, overhanging foliage blocking the light. They hurried across the shady ground to a dilapidated wooden building that leaned into weather and time as if it might tumble down at any moment. The glass in the one window was broken, but the door with its bent hinge could still be pulled tight against the frame. The gypsy spread the blanket on the faded floor planks and sat with the child resting her head on her lap.

"You saw the rowboats on the other side of the wharf," he said. "I'll come back when it's dark and take you down the river. Will your man be waiting?"

"Yes, he knows this river and said there is a spit of sand several miles downstream. He will be there with a horse when the sun has gone down."

After the rush of the past hour or so, Philippe felt everything slow down and press in on the flimsy walls of the boathouse. He had reacted, that was all, and had not stopped to think of consequences. If the priest found out what he had done,

there would be no future for him in the seminary. He sighed heavily. It didn't matter. The seminary for him now seemed akin to the orphanage for the wild child.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why?"

"After he told me about the orphanage I showed Father Honoré the drawing to try and persuade him she didn't belong there. It only made him angrier at her and you. He said"—Philippe could feel himself choking on the words—"the face of the girl on the bison was idolatry."

"He is a small-town priest, but I doubt those to whom he must answer would have a different view. He had also made up his mind about the child before you spoke. Where is the drawing?"

"He tore it up."

"He can do that to paper. We must make sure he does not tear the child to pieces."

"Until dark, then. I will whistle when I'm close."

He didn't know what else to do but go home. He certainly didn't want to see the priest or the mayor, and it would be better if he kept out of sight. His parents would retire early, so it wouldn't be too difficult to leave the house unnoticed at the necessary hour.

To make things appear normal and to try to keep his mind calm, he went to his father's workshop and helped with the fitting of doors on an armoire before they were taken off again to be finely sanded and varnished. He would have liked to confide in his parents, but for his father and his mother the priest's word was law, and they would have been very disturbed at his actions and fearful of his standing with the Church. He wished he could show the drawing to his father, though,

because he would appreciate the child's artistry and be curious about the animals, especially the mammoth. But the girl's face on the bison would make no sense to him, and Philippe knew the priest's judgement of it would be supreme. He was right, however, about the consoling nature of the woodworking and the sense of well-being that resulted from simple tasks with sandpaper and brush.

A few hours passed without his giving much consideration to the proposed escape, other than his thinking vaguely of rowing the old woman and child through the darkness. There was no moon, but the skies were clear and he felt starlight would be a sufficient guide. By the time his father finally announced, "That's done, then," and began putting his tools away, Philippe knew the priest and mayor would have discovered the abandonment of the camp and be searching the countryside for the vanished child. He hoped they would not suspect a hiding place so close to the town. The old woman had spoken only to the bearded man and the woman in the camp and he was sure they would not have mentioned the escape plan to anyone else. That way the other gypsies could honestly deny any knowledge of events to come. There would be no search once the sun had gone down, so he should have no trouble getting back to the boathouse and out onto the river.

As he and his parents were finishing their supper in the kitchen, there was a knock at the door. His mother opened it to Father Honoré and the mayor. "Come in, come in," she said. "We have just eaten, but I can offer you some coffee and cake."

"Thank you, *Madame*, but no." The mayor spoke firmly, and Philippe knew right away they suspected him of helping in the escape.

The priest did not waste any time. "I have told the mayor of your association with the blasphemous *enfant sauvage*," he said. "I was also able to save enough of

the drawing so he could see the sinful display of the child's mind. Where is she, Philippe?"

His parents looked rightly shocked. Their son had just been accused by God's representative of involvement with a profane being. "What have you done, Philippe?" his mother cried. His father looked tired and old, the lines of his face like thin gouges in soft pine.

There was no use in denying his complicity, but the image of the orphanage-seminary was too strong in his mind for betrayal. "They've gone," he said. "The old woman and the child left by horseback this morning."

"Did you warn them?" the priest asked.

He hesitated in his response, knowing that what he said would cut him off from this priest and possibly from the Church altogether. He had already disobeyed an edict from on high. It had been decided the child was to go to Toulouse and it was heretical to spurn such judgement. But he answered as he knew he must. The child and her drawing mattered to him more than anything the Church seemed able to offer. Issues of sin and sacrilege were countered by a vision of the child running through the hills and finding the family she surely had.

"Yes," he said. "I told the old woman about the orphanage."

"It was not you place to do," the priest stated angrily.

"Forgive me, Father," the mayor interrupted, "but we must find the child. Which way did they go on the horse, Philippe?"

He had disobeyed, but he was not ashamed, and now he would lie to prevent the priest from tearing the child in two and crumpling her between his consecrated palms. "East," he said, and bowed his head as if admitting his wrong.

The mayor turned on his heel and went out the door. The priest started to follow but stopped and, with his back to the family, said in a sad but resolute voice, “May the Lord forgive you, Philippe.”

He wanted to shout out the old woman’s words about the Lord’s picking and choosing of the little children who were allowed to come unto Him, but he kept his silence and focused on the boathouse and rowboats not far away.

Both his parents were extremely upset, but his father seemed more disappointed than angry. His mother’s agitation showed itself in weeping and proclaiming that he must make amends.

“You must go to confession in the morning,” she said through her handkerchief pressed to her face. “Contrition is the only answer. Meanwhile they will capture the child and that problem will be over.”

“*Papa*,” he said, “I wish I could explain, but I’m afraid you wouldn’t understand even if I tried.” These were the same words he could offer the priest through the confessional grate.

The cabinet-maker looked at his only son. Philippe knew he had been forsaken.

At nine o’clock he left the house through the door that led into the garden and jumped the low wall surrounding his mother’s flowers and vegetables. By the boathouse fifteen minutes later, all was quiet. In the deep shadow of the trees there were only the call of a whippoorwill and rustle of tiny creatures in the undergrowth. He thought of the noise the mammoth would make walking in these woods and regretted once more having shown the drawing to the priest, but his chief concern now was for the old woman and child and to get them downriver to safety. Forgetting to whistle, he stepped up to the decaying door and pushed it open.

The gypsy and child were standing in a corner as if ready to defend themselves, though they held no weapons and there was no exit from the building except the way he had come in.

"It's alright," he said. "We can go now."

The two said nothing, but followed him, a thousand winking eyes in the night sky showing them the way, although the eastern sky was dark with an impending storm. In a sheltered half-rectangle of water formed by the low bank and long wharf the rowboats waited. Philippe knew their oars would be shipped but ready for use. He and his friends had swum at this spot for many summers and taken the craft out on fishing expeditions in the early morning hours. The boats belonged to all the people of the town and there was an honour system centered on the tin can into which one tossed a *sou* that rented a minute or an hour, it was all the same. He took a coin from his pocket and bent low so it dropped quietly into the container.

"Is it enough to buy our freedom?" the old woman asked.

"At least they won't arrest me for stealing a boat."

"They will not arrest you, Philippe. But that *sou* will not save you from their condemnation."

It was true he could not buy success for his efforts, let alone absolution, though he hoped to drop his passengers without incident downriver and return invisibly home. There would be no proof of his further involvement in their disappearance.

The gypsy and child sat in the stern. The girl was very quiet and, despite her proximity, he could not see her face clearly in the darkness, but he knew she must be afraid. He would have liked to give her pencil and paper so she could draw him struggling with the oars to clear the wharf's end where the current would catch them. They were almost there when he heard loud voices. The old woman said something sharply in her own tongue as torches lit up the tree trunks and a group

of shouting men led by the priest and mayor ran the length of the wharf and tried to grab the boat. The stern turned away from them into the current and Philippe clambered to the bow where he tried to push off against the wharf with an oar. But one of the men grabbed the flat blade and twisted it so violently to one side he lost his balance and toppled into the water.

When he surfaced, spluttering and slightly dazed, the boat had bobbed to the edge of the torchlight and was drifting slowly downstream. He could see the gypsy trying to restrain the child amidst the shouted imprecations of the men. Treading water he looked up through the smoky light to where the priest and mayor were untying the rope to another vessel, so he leaned forward into the river and began to swim after the fugitives he wanted so desperately to protect. There was still time to get away. He was sure neither man was experienced on the water and would want to venture too far into the shadows. But the rowboat glided beyond his reach, and as he swam on he heard the old woman's cry followed by a barely audible splash.

"Hurry, Philippe! She is gone!"

He flung all his strength into the last strokes that brought him to the side of the boat. The gypsy was kneeling in the stern peering down into the water.

"I could not hold her," she said regretfully, then added as a mere statement of fact, "You will not save her now."

Holding the gunwale he pulled himself along the hull's edge to the stern and dove into the black depths. Though his eyes were open he could see nothing and reached out blindly hoping to grab a lock of hair or piece of clothing. But he knew if she was down here the current would have carried her away from his beseeching grasp. The air burst from his lungs and mouth into frenzied bubbles that rose with him to the surface, and as he broke the watery plane he yelled, "Can she swim? Can she swim?" But the rowboat carrying the old woman was about to vanish from

sight entirely, and all he heard was her mysterious response, “Never again,” before he lost her shadowy form forever. Meanwhile the priest and mayor called his name repeatedly as they spun slowly on an anchor rope in the circle of torchlight. He thought briefly of crossing the river and making his way downstream to the rendezvous spot, but there would be no deliverance there for a drowned child, so he headed for the wharf, ignoring the exclamations of the two anxious officials as he passed their prison ship.

Clambering up the wooden pilings he rested a moment on the planks, then rose and walked silently past the row of torches. One of the men offered his jacket but Philippe raised his hand in rejection. “You can cover the child’s body with it when you find her,” he said. “But it still won’t hide what you’ve done.” He walked on past the boathouse and through the trees. When he reached his mother’s garden wall, he sat on the cold stone and stared blankly at his sodden shoes. Despite what he had told the man on the wharf, he knew he had killed her.

*

For almost a year now he had lived like a ghost in his parents’ home, helping his father in the workshop and taking his meals at the required times, but conversing little with them except for polite exchanges about the weather or details to do with cabinet-making. His mother tried to prod him into discussion of his future, but his father had not excused him for his role in the wild child’s escape and presumed death, even though the body had never been found. He appeared content with his son’s physical help but treated him like a competent assistant with whom he must maintain a cordial professional relationship and nothing more. Philippe received food and shelter for the service he provided in the shop, and because they

would never disown him completely he would be allowed to stay as long as there were no complications. Their continuing disappointment in his refusal to consider the seminary, even though Father Honoré, perhaps to assuage his own guilt, had forgiven his trespasses and urged him to go to Toulouse, was heightened by his refusal to attend Sunday Mass or even to consider entering the church again.

That he had not forgiven the priest was evident, and though he was sorry for the trouble it caused his parents he would not bend on the matter. He could not do so because he had not absolved himself. If the priest was guilty of damning the wild child to a life in the orphanage thus prompting the need for her escape, he considered himself ultimately responsible for the failure to save her. He was sure the priest's zealous pursuit of the girl was fuelled by his having seen the supposedly idolatrous images. That was why he had arranged to have a constable's man watch the house that fatal night. That man saw him in the garden and was able to rouse the torch-bearers quickly so they were never far behind Philippe as he headed for the river.

Wearing black when he was not working or sleeping, he trod the route he had taken beyond the garden wall, soon creating a trampled path through the grass to the wharf where he stood in all seasons staring downstream towards the freedom she had sought. In the winter he was alone, but in the warmer months the bathers and rowers surrounded him, their endless cries in punishing opposition to his desire for silence. He could not keep away. The wharf and river, and even the rowboats as playthings in the current, were his only connection to the child, representing his struggle against the priest's nether world of sin and damnation. If he let them go, he let her go, and he would drown with her memory. Yet his purgatory was never quite absolute for sometimes out of the water a drawing arose whose images before God suggested deliverance greater than any he had previously imagined.

6. Face in the Water

In December it had been too cold to work, though he had tried to continue, wearing fingerless gloves until he could no longer feel the brush. Keeping the fire alive was a distraction while he paid attention to details on the wall. Back at the farmhouse he drove himself crazy with his focus on exactly where he had left off and what remained to be done. Claudia was in the States, and Aurelio was kept busy with a flu outbreak in the village and surrounding region. One evening as he sipped a whiskey and read a study of Font-de-Gaume, he realized Aurelio had been right—the basic assumption of all the Paleolithic experts was that every cave-painter had been a man. The subject of gender was never broached directly, but the archeologists and anthropologists always referred to the "hunters" making pigment for use in the caves and of the close association of these men with the animals portrayed. Who had painted the Algonquin images at the bottom of the cliff, a man or a woman? He recalled Annie's crayon markings on the rock and wondered if she had inherited any of his artistic ability, but she had lived so long ago she

seemed more an ancestor now than a descendant. What was it her eyes saw beyond the portrait's frame? If he ever let her go, who or what would she become?

One morning when he opened his eyes, the dream of the Paleolithic girl was still running in colours through his head.

An is walking the rough trail back to the camp and her circle. The night is cold but the fur against her skin keeps her warm. Fox cub and rabbit dangle from her shoulder. The end of her spear thumps the earth with each step. She is allowed to hunt for small game or birds. No one spurns the smallest amount of meat. But much of the time she stays in the camp, helping the women skin the animals and scrape their hides for sleeping covers and clothing, carving out hooves to hold water and paint, keeping the fire alive near the entrance to the cave. She is not always quick to accept these tasks, which is a surprise to the elders. She is fourteen and not yet with child.

The outer world is a small space to her, at least the one she walks in. Wherever they stop, for a day or moons on end, there are boundaries. The camp is always on high ground that you can see from wherever you are below. If it disappears in a storm or mist and you are lost, no one searches for you. It is easy to lose someone from the circle, usually a young hunter who is out on his own. But every year one or two new children are allowed to live. They keep it that way so there are not too many mouths to feed, burying the unwanted ones under stones so the hyenas will not dig them up. Her turn will come soon when she lies with a man and her belly is large. She will watch over the child and stay by the fire once she has given birth.

It is a small space, but wondrous. The circle overlooks the waving grasslands where the reindeer quietly graze and the mammoths tread with thunder. They are huge but she has seen them lift tiny blades of grass with their trunks and nuzzle one

another gently. The air is filled with birds in the day and bats at night. She watches the red, green, and blue birds rise and fall on the wind, never touching each other no matter how crowded the sky. The bats are barely visible but their hum is loud in the darkness. They do not nest in the high caves but in hollow trees by the river, pulling tiny fish from the water with their claws and trapping insects in their soft black wings.

The world inside her, like a herd of animals always on the run, moves faster when she overhears the men's words about the paintings, how they come from the other side of the cave walls, passing through the men before they appear on the rock. This happens deep inside the caves. She has never been there because only the boys can hold the torches and carry the food for those who paint. But in the space between her eyes she sees the caverns and smaller chambers the boys describe to her, hears the steady drip of water, and feels the rough bulges of stone that become the shoulders of the bison and mammoths. She watches the men come out of the caves with red and black fingertips and sometimes the backs of their hands covered entirely with these colours. The boys tell her they blow the paint from their mouths around the shapes of their fingers and thumbs to leave their hands on the walls. They are touching the breath of the cave when they do this. An wants to touch this breath too. She wants to eat that paint. She does not know why she has this hunger.

When she sleeps she dreams of the caves and the shapes there—the reindeer and mammoths, as well as the bison and other animals. She sees them all out on the grasslands, except for the huge cat with long, curving teeth, just a story-creature now that the men talk about to frighten the women and children and to show their own courage. One day the hunters find a faded white skull and pile of bones. The cat has been dead a long time, and the remains of its last kill are

scattered nearby. They carry the skull back to the camp where the women make necklaces from the teeth for all the men. When they manage to slay an old mammoth that has wandered from the herd, the hunters make tiny carvings from the giant tusks that are the shape of animals they paint on the cave walls. All the men wear these around their necks or carry them wrapped in pieces of hide. If you carry the animals with you in the carvings, she wonders, why do you leave them behind on the walls? Then she realizes the lives of the tusk pieces are only as long as the lives of those who wear or carry them. The carvings are buried with the men in secret places. But the paintings never die.

Perhaps going into the caves with the men is like following the rabbit to its home. In her dreams she does not pretend to be a man or a boy but disguises herself as a rabbit. There are many twists and turns to the tunnel when she goes in after them, but she is quick and keeps their torchlight in sight. When they reach the room where the paintings come through the walls she hides behind a rock and watches. She wants a painting to pass through her. How is it when a bison rumbles under your skin? And when it comes out from your mouth or fingertips does it eat the rabbit?

She knows from the boys that the men build mounds of leafy branches to sit on when they paint the high walls. Sometimes a man stands or sits for a long time with a piece of charcoal between his fingers to make the curving lines of an animal's chest and haunches. This is before he fills the chest and legs with colours made from crushed red and black rock mixed with the dripping water or the juice of berries. She asks if they ever paint trees for the animals to rub against or grass and flowers for them to eat, and the boys laugh. She is puzzled by their laughing faces.

Blue rivers and the flashing fish in them? No, No, they cry, these things do not come through the walls.

Deep within the cave, where no one can walk, or even crawl, the giant animals must live without food. Perhaps they go through other walls to be outside and eat. When an animal dies at the end of sharp spears, it means there is one fewer to paint. But the men eat the animals and take them inside their bodies back into the cave. When they place their hands on the walls, maybe the animals become free again, but, if so, how do they get back inside the men? And what happens to the animals inside her and all the women who never go into the caves? The only thing she can think of is that they change inside women's bodies and come into the world as people. She can never speak with any man about this, but when she tries to give a woman her questions, she is told to cut the reindeer hide into thin strips that hold the clothing skins together.

Eight of the circle sit beneath the rock slab over the cave's entrance . Six more are away hunting. It is a steep, slow climb to the camp for enemies or occasional friends, and there is always someone watching the trail. But the Old Ones still come sometimes with their thick foreheads and strong jaws that can crack the thigh bone of a reindeer. They are fierce fighters and kill people in the circle before they are driven off. The dead are strong hunters who do not appear again for the many years it takes a boy to become a man. Sometimes a girl is stolen. How can she speak with the Old Ones? When they shout as they fight An cannot understand their words. There are not many of them left, she is told. That is why they take young girls. But the mating does not work. It is like a bison and a reindeer coming together. Nothing grows from this. The bison and the reindeer are on the cave walls but never touch.

Sometimes other circles pass by the camp. There is much hunting talk by the men. The women sit together and share the hot bark drink. They trade sharp pieces of bone that make the sewing holes in the skins and dried berry beads that hang from hide necklaces. They talk about the rain and sun and point out the young girls who will soon give birth. The men speak in low voices about the paintings, and she hears there are other caves where the animals live in the walls. She wants to find these caves and see the paintings there, but first she wants to see what the men of her own circle have done.

Now she skins the red fox and white rabbit under watchful eyes, speaking gently to the animals as she does. The hunter must take the fur from what has been killed if it is to be good food. They praise her. She is like a boy. Her spear is like a boy's spear. Next year she will give a strong boy to the circle. The words please her, though the men never speak her name. The speaking of a name is the biggest noise around the fire and it belongs to the men and boys. She pushes a stick through the rabbit and is holding it close to the flames when she feels a creature creeping inside her stalking its prey. The spotted hyena moves this way, only now there is not the fear that comes with the hyena, and when the creature comes to rest between her eyes she feels she is the one who has tracked it down. She does not want to kill it but keep it safe and alive. As she hears the murmur of the men's voices and smells the rabbit's meat, the creature stands on its hind legs, puts its forepaws against a painting on a rock wall, and sniffs for a sign of the painter. She knows such a sign is not in the outlines of the hands that the boys have described because those hands are not always there. Do the men from different circles paint the animals differently, or are the animals in all the caves the same? She looks around the camp. No one is the same. They all have legs, arms, faces, but when their pieces are sewn together like the skins of the animals they are not her. She

touches the face she has seen in the water when she stoops to drink. It has always belonged to the water, just as the sun belongs to the sky. Now she is not so sure. The creature on its hind legs speaks to her so the others cannot hear. It wants to go with her the next time the animals pass through the men.

When the men paint, they stay in the caves for days. One night after the circle has eaten and the sun disappears into the far hills, four of them walk toward the cave entrance where two boys stand with torches lit and food slung over their shoulders. One man carries skins to sit on, another the charcoal sticks from cold fires, a third the crushed colours of the rock held in hooves, and the last bundles of rabbit fur and brushes made from reindeer hair. She lies with her eyes open until everyone is sleeping in shadows by the low fire then she follows the stone trail. It is not easy to creep away because one man always stays to protect the women and children, but he is listening beyond the flames to the outside animals talking in the night.

She feels her way along the dark passage until she is deep enough inside to strike a flint rock against the wall and light her small torch without being seen by those in the camp. As the torch flares she listens for voices ahead, but it takes her a long time to reach them. The twists and turns are many and she begins to wonder if she has missed another tunnel whose entrance was too small to notice. The walls and floor are dry, though she can hear water dripping to one side. Then a low booming sound fills the passage and she hears their words. She rubs out her torch against the wall and moves toward a flickering light that strengthens as she nears the opening of a chamber.

It is a large room with a high ceiling, so high she cannot see the top. There is a small fire burning in the centre. Two men are crouching by the far wall, their

backs to her. One boy stands behind them, a torch in each hand. On a mound of branches another man sits higher than her head and paints on a side wall, a torch stuck in a crack in the rock beside him. The fourth man and the other boy have disappeared. She leans forward to see the animals, but they are too far away. The men will find her in the firelight, so she steps back into the passage and waits in the shadows.

She cannot go into the room. The men will be very angry. She has seen them beat a boy because his quick movement frightened a herd of reindeer and there was no meat that day or the next. They will beat her because she is in a place she does not belong, and they will tie her down so she does not leave camp again. The circle always moves on soon after the paintings are done. She will have to return here each night to know when they are finished. Then she will hide in the tunnel and let the men and boys pass by her on their way to the circle. She will go into the large room and see the paintings. If they leave the room in the night she will do this. But if they leave when the sun is in the sky, she will not be able to disappear from the camp unless the women and the guard think she is going hunting. The hunting path is one way and the tunnel the other. She does not know how to be in two places at once.

For many nights she waits in the darkness outside the room, listening to their voices, trying not to fall asleep. She does sleep, though, because she must have strength for her outside work in the day. The painters and boys stay in the cave and sleep when she is away because they are always working when she looks into the room in the night. Their absence from the circle means she must hunt for many hours and always bring home game. Every day the man who guards the camp takes her with him to find reindeer. When they see a small herd grazing, this man runs forward and throws his spear. Then she yells and does the same. After an animal

falls with blood flowing from its mouth, she cups her hands and drinks the bright liquid with him. He rubs blood on her face and tells her she is a hunter. The two of them together cannot bring down a bison or a mammoth. It takes all the men to kill the large beasts, and it is very dangerous. But there are many smaller animals in the tall grasses and sometimes she hurls a stone from her sling and hits a walking bird. The women pluck the feathers and give her the longest ones to wear in her hair.

One night she wakens in the darkness of the tunnel and does not hear their voices. Crawling forward she lies on her belly and turns her ear to the cool, small wind coming from the room. It is not just the silence that warns her. Suddenly she realizes there is no torchlight and quickly shrinks into the deepest shadows. Did they walk by her as she slept? Did her eyes stay closed in the noise of their words and glare of their light? No, it is they who are all sleeping now. They have finished the paintings. In the morning they will rise and leave the cave forever. She should go back to the camp, but if she does she will never see the paintings. She will have to hide in the tunnel and go into the room when they have passed by. She pushes her body under a shelf not far from the entrance and lies there blinking in the dark.

After so much time has passed that the sun will be climbing into the sky, there are still no voices in the room. She goes again to listen where the small wind blows, but there is only silence. Now she knows they have gone and are back with the circle getting ready to move on. An, where is An? the women ask as they gather up their skins. She is a good hunter, she will find us, the men tell them as they pick up their weapons. And they walk away. No matter, she will have a story when she catches up, a story of a hyena that attacked her. The circle does not eat hyenas, so even though she killed the snapping beast she did not need to carry its meat to the camp. That will be tonight or tomorrow. Now she will see the paintings.

Her torch in the room is the moon barely shining behind the edge of heavy clouds. She sees only the ground in front of her feet until she holds the light much higher than she did in the tunnel. This way she finds the mound of branches and a small pile of sleeping skins beside the fire embers. Why are these skins not back in the circle? She is puzzled, but the walls are waiting.

Low down she sees the big black cats, the ones whose teeth are not long and curving but still sharp enough to frighten the children and even the hunters in the long grass. They run together along the wall and when she follows them she sees they are chasing the reindeer. One male with big antlers looks back. He will not escape their claws and teeth. The animals are made from charcoal. All the bodies of the cats are black lines that show their strength and speed. They are very fast, faster than the reindeer. She has never seen a big cat run after another animal, but she knows whoever made these lines has seen that happen. How can a man draw what he has not seen? She walks over to the pile of branches and climbs up. At first the wall is empty but when she holds the torch almost as high as a man's hand can reach, she sees the bison. The torch shakes in her hand. Her eyes close and open, close and open. Her chest is full of pain because her breath stays inside. She coughs and her breath runs free.

Three giant bison dance in a row. Their backs are curved, their tongues hang from their mouths, and their legs are rippling river water when the storms come from the north. Nothing is chasing them and they are chasing nothing. They are dancing and their eyes are happy. Their happiness is so large she cannot hold it. It climbs the wall and pours across the ceiling she can barely see. She sways and almost falls into the sound of hooves that goes on and on. But it is the red and brown colours that hold her to the wall. The red is the sun going down at the end of a hot day. It is the shaking sun as it passes into the earth. The brown is the hides

of the animals when they have been rubbed into the softness of feathers. The red and brown do not touch but meet each other at lines of charcoal so thin they can barely hold the muscles of the shoulders and legs. She reaches out and puts her hand on the wall. Lightly at first so it is only stone beneath her fingers and thumb. Then her palm rests against a bison's eye, and she can feel the stone move as the eye turns to look at her through her bones and skin. She is the moving stone and the dance of paint. The echo of voices fills the room.

Even though they are returning from the camp so there is no other way out, so she jumps down from the pile and runs to the entrance. The voices are not there but the echo is louder than before. Pushing the burning torch end against the floor she stands still in the darkness. The new light comes from across the room. She steps into the tunnel. Soon the men and boys appear one by one from a crack in the far wall. They have been deeper into the cave where there are more paintings. That is where the small wind comes from. She sees them lift the sleeping skins to their shoulders. She drops the torch behind a rock. There is no more time. The shape of the tunnel is between her eyes as she moves away from them. Her hands touch the walls that lead her to the circle. The voices following her are talking cats who speak of what they hunt.

When she stumbles into daylight the women are looking away from her. Then they turn and cry, "An An, where have you been? There is danger." The guard stands on the edge of the slope, his spear raised. She can hear the sounds of the Old Ones from below.

It is soon over. The Old Ones rush over the top of the slope, swinging clubs and stabbing with short spears. The men and boys come out of the cave to see the women and children falling. She runs back and forth, trying to escape the death.

The men fight but do not win. They lie still on the ground and the circle is broken. Only An and Or, the painter she saw on the pile of branches, remain. The Old Ones crowd around them, pushing with their clubs. They speak to one another, their voices deep in their throats, then reach out and pull the painter forward. An runs to the cave but an Old One is faster. He ties her and Or together and makes them crouch against a wall. She looks at the camp. The bodies lie bloody. The Old Ones begin to cut off their hands and feet. This is what happened in stories she and the other children heard by the fire.

Smoke rises from the dead fire into the sky, the embers turning into charcoal that no one will use. They leave the camp, walking towards the sun. She and Or carry the sleeping skins, while the Old Ones bring the weapons. It is a long day and she is thirsty as she walks. Or asks for water, but an Old One hits him with the flat end of a spear. She sees the streaks of paint on his hands. The dancing bison are far away.

They stop to drink by a river that flows through the long grass. It is not deep and the water is cool on their feet as they cross to the other side. Many birds fly above their heads. She does not know why their wings never touch as they circle and dive. Sometimes the sky is red or yellow, sometimes it is the colour of charcoal. But today it wears a blue face in the water when she looks down. She wants to ask Or why he does not paint birds in the sky. One of the Old Ones stabs a silver fish and holds it up, laughing. There are no fish on the cave walls either.

They walk toward the hills. She is given a piece of the fish to eat. Or is given nothing. She sees him bend and pick berries from a bush. He chews them until the red juice runs from his lips. He smiles at her. His hand touches her head. Sometimes the Old Ones hunt reindeer. They are good hunters and, like the circle

did, speak to the animals as they skin them. Everyone carries some meat but she and Or do not. The Old Ones chew with their strong jaws as they walk.

They reach a camp in the low hills where the women make a fire. There is only one child that she can see. The camp is on a rise with trees to hide it, but the smoke still drifts into the sky, telling where they are.

Every day is the same. She skins the animals and breaks open the bones for the juices inside. She sews the pieces of skin together as she has done before and finds dry wood for the fire. She does not hunt, only the men hunt. By the edge of the camp, Or sits with his hands and feet tied together. When the sun is high and when it goes down behind the far hills she brings him water and scraps of food, bits of meat and bone the Old Ones have dropped. He is not strong now and his eyes are the eyes of an animal that has been wounded and will die. He says no words to her when she is close. Maybe his voice is dead now. But one morning his hand pats the ground beside him. She sits down and waits.

Or does not look at her. He talks quietly to the air but she can hear him. He tells the air the Old Ones will soon go the way of the cats with the curving teeth. The cats were big and strong, but the new animals were too many and ate the places where they lived. One day the cats went away and did not come back. The circle people will not follow them, he tells her. He turns his face to An and she sees his eyes flame up from embers. Go, find a child, he says. He points to the far hills and claps his hands. He closes his eyes. She is already gone. But she stays beside him.

She waits for the words. They come slowly to the space between her eyes and rest there until they are ready. When she speaks of the paintings Or does not move. She tells him she was in the cave with the reindeer, cats, and bison. The stone of the wall moved when the bison saw her. Then the space between her eyes is almost

empty. The words are over except for the ones in her mouth that she will swallow. She has always swallowed them before. Now she holds up her hand and blows the words around its shape. She tells Or the paintings are children.

As the days pass Or tells her about the red and black rocks. -Break them into pieces. The knee-bone of a bison or reindeer makes them smaller so they become dirt.- He moves his hand. -Stir the dirt with water. Eat berries and spit into the paint or put in blood or piss.-

-How do you do it?-

-Do what?-

-Paint the animals.-

He draws some lines in the sand with his finger. -Mark these lines with charcoal. Heat an animal hoof in the fire. The thick water holds reindeer hairs to a stick. Put paint inside the lines with the hairs. With bits of fur and skin too.-

She knows these words will help her one day, but now they are not enough. -No, how do they get between your eyes?-

-If you do not look for them, they will find you in the cave.-

-They pass through you.-

He smiles at her. -Yes. They pass through you.-

-But why are they alone on the walls?-

-They are not. There are many animals together—the bison, the reindeer, the cats, the mammoths.-

-But on the walls they have no home. There is no grass to eat, no water to drink, no sky to look down on them.-

Or claps his hands and laughs. -They live inside the walls and come out to let us see them. They do not bring their homes with them.-

-So the grasses, water, and sky stay inside the walls?-

-Yes.-

-And the birds and flowers?-

-The birds are not strong enough to come through the walls. None of these things you speak of is strong enough to do this. Not even the sky.-

She frowns. -What about people? They do not live inside the walls. They wait in the caves for the animals to find them.- She is silent for many moments because what she wants to say is not there. -The face I see in the water- she asks finally. -Where is the paint for that?-

-An- he says. He lifts his chin and smiles. "The water is empty, then the painting is in the water."

She is more alone as Or grows weaker, and wonders what she will do when he dies. She wants to paint, but to do this she cannot stay with the Old Ones. She does not know why their men have not tried to mate with her, but it will happen soon. It is not the way to the child Or wants her to find, nor the way to the paintings already inside her.

He lies on the ground now and does not eat the droppings she brings him. The water running from his mouth is a tiny river she cannot dam. He tries to speak, but his words are the broken wings of birds that cannot fly. She tells him she will paint the animals and he nods. She does not say other things will pass through her as well and if they don't she will not wait for them.

One morning Or's eyes are open but he does not wake. She wants to cover him with rocks, but the Old Ones carry him away to a place she does not know. She is the last of the circle though she knows there are other circles around their fires as she looks across the grasslands to the far hills. She listens to the noise of the

female Old Ones and wants to hear voices she understands. But even if she finds them they will be voices that will not speak to her as Or did. For them, she will be a woman unable to paint. Her children will be skin and bone not red and black dirt mixed with water, berry juice, blood, and piss. In a new circle the men and boys will walk into a cave without her.

The Old Ones never saw her try to escape because she would not leave Or while he was alive. Now they are not sure, so at night she is tied to a tree and covered with a skin against the cool air. She hears the men and women talking by the fire and sees them looking at her by the tree.

The next night a man unties her and pulls off her clothing skins. She is not afraid because she has seen this happen at the edge of the circle fire many times. It hurts when his hardness pushes inside her, then she can feel only her own wetness around him. He is heavy on top of her and the face that he sees in the water is hidden in the darkness. His breath on her is a strong wind, but at the end he cries out with the voice of a small animal. In the morning she can see some of the wetness is blood. Others will follow, she thinks, but she is left alone after that as if she will now give them what they want.

She is not tied any more. She sits with them by the fire through the time of the full moon and shares the food. She is given a woman's work. Near the end of one day when the sun rests on the top of the farthest hill, she goes to the stream with a woman. They carry a large skin between them to fill with water. They will hold the four corners together, carry it back to the camp, and hang the skin from a branch. In the small hole near the top they will push a long reed. She and the others will drink from this reed, but how long will it be this way when her belly does not grow?

On the way to the stream the woman turns her back and squats to empty her insides. An picks up the skin and walks toward the water. When she gets to the low bank the sun moves behind the hill and the other side of the stream is in shadow. She has no food, not even a sharp bone, but she knows she will not stop. The water is cold. She folds the skin against her chest and walks over the flat stones on the bottom of the stream. She does not look down but knows the face in the dark water is very clear. When she disappears into the shadow the woman's shouting noise is far away.

An walks a long way, eating berries and drinking water from new streams. She passes herds of reindeer that do not run away, but she can do nothing to bring one down. The bison do not show themselves, but she will see them when she finds her home. Rabbits run across her path and small birds sing above her head. With a spear or sling she could hit one of these and eat meat. Using a sharp stone she cuts a long piece from her dried water-skin and tries to make a sling, but the Old Ones' hide is too stiff. She needs a hunting weapon, and without it and a fire she must sleep in trees because of the hyenas. The nights are colder and soon her shelter must be more than limbs and leaves. In the wind-blown branches she hears Or telling her about the paint.

The round moon is gone before she finds a circle. Crouching behind rocks as darkness falls she listens to their voices like her own and counts them by the fire. There are ten men and women. Four children sit together and throw sticks on a log. She wants to walk into the circle and greet them. They will give her meat and a place to rest. Then she will be one of them again, no longer alone, a woman ready to scrape and sew when the hunters return. She stays in the shadows of their night silence waiting for a sign, and, in a ray of moon-light on a bison bone, sees what she must do. This place is not her home, but there is something she needs here.

When the fire is low, she walks past a still man to pick up a short spear and soft reindeer skin. A flint-rock is at her fingertips when a hand touches her leg. A young girl is dreaming by the fire. For a moment she thinks she will steal her too, but knows they will be caught. An puts down what she has taken and returns to the man. She lies down behind him and stirs against his sleeping back. He takes a deep breath and turns over, saying another name as he enters her. The pool he leaves inside is the open eye of a child.

She keeps walking toward the higher hills that come closer as she moves through long grass, swims rivers on her back with the skins on her stomach, and hunts small animals with her spear. She has made a good sling now and the stones hum through the air into the birds' feathers. The flint begins her fires that burn through the night and she sleeps beside them. When she gets to the hills she will find a cave for shelter where she will paint. The bison are there with the reindeer and mammoths. One night she hears a scream that is not from a circle person or an Old One but tells her the cats are there too. She holds her spear and listens for any sound in the trees beyond the firelight, but no death comes to her.

There will be reindeer in the valleys of the hills. She will hunt them before the snow stays on the ground and let the meat freeze at the entrance to the cave. She will gather as many berries as she can with the green plants and the food that grows on the trees. Her fire will be deep in the cave and there will be a wall of rocks and branches near the entrance to keep out animals that do not come through the walls. She does not fear the Old Ones. Once there is snow they will rest in their own caves and keep their fires burning.

After the curved moon has returned she comes to the edge of the hills. They are higher than any she has seen before and behind them are the ones with white tops that people and animals cannot climb. Up there, in the stories of her circle, are

birds so big they can lift reindeer from the ground and carry them to their nests. She wonders if their feathers are red and black.

She walks up into the hills and sees the reindeer gather where the sun shines brightly in the valleys. There are many small caves in the rocks but none deep enough to keep out the cold winds or with walls big enough for the paintings. She sleeps in these small spaces and dreams they grow larger like a child in her belly. One night she dreams of a bison standing on a ledge above a white mist of falling water. Far below the ledge the mist becomes a river. The sun rises in the sky, goes down, and rises again before she is standing by a riverbank with the mist above her. When she climbs to where the water begins to fall, the ledge under a rock wall is wide enough to sleep on and burn a small fire, but she will leave no signs that she is here.

In her dream there was no cave, but she knows the bison did not climb like her to the ledge. It came out of the wall and will show her how to enter. She walks along the ledge from one end of this wall to the other, but it is hard and smooth and gives nothing to her eyes. She sits and watches while the sun's shadow line creeps up the rock over her head. There is one spot where this line bends and breaks and disappears before it starts up again. Climbing to this place she finds a thin crack as tall as her body and feels a small wind blowing on her face. She smiles and puts her hand on the warm stone. All around her feet are loose pieces of the rock she will crush into dirt.

There are two passages that go in different directions not far from the entrance. One leads straight to a small, narrow chamber with a low sloping ceiling so there is not much room to stand. The other tunnel has more turns and the walls stay so close together at times she has to hold in her breath to squeeze through. Her torch,

a piece of greasy hide wrapped around a straight branch, makes smoke in the last tight space, and at first when she enters the large open cavern she does not see its shape clearly. The smoke curls to the ceiling and vanishes, but looking for other openings deeper into the cave she finds only the one she has stepped through. Water seeps from the rocks on the far side and gathers in a small pool that must have a hole beneath because it does not grow any bigger.

Now she touches the walls with her hands. They are mostly smooth like those in the small chamber, but in some places have many bumps and cracks. The ceiling is too high to reach and long pieces of rock hang from it. She holds the torch close to the floor of stone and dirt looking for footprints, but there are no signs of people or animals. No cat or cave bear looking for winter shelter can get past the narrow tunnel, so she will block it against stray Old Ones and circle people. She wants to be alone. Only the bison and other creatures will pass through her with the homes she hopes they will bring.

For two moons as it gets colder, she hunts. The reindeer calves in the valley are not hard to kill. They stand still as the older animals move away from her raised spear. She throws it straight and hits them in the belly or back leg. Then she follows as they run and stumble and fall, the blood a river in their mouths. She cooks and eats part of their tongues and carries the rest of the meat above the cave to a place where there is always snow. She wraps the meat in the skin she has stripped from the calves, buries it beneath the snow, and covers the place with rocks. In the long cold time she will bring the meat down to the cave entrance where it will stay hard. The food on the trees has mostly gone but she finds many berries and the green plants she can eat. She puts them in the snow too after she has had her fill each day. Inside the entrance to the cave where the passage narrows, she piles her wall of rocks and branches. If she makes this too high and

wide she will not be able to move back and forth from the hard food to the room where she will paint. It is a weakness but in the small light of the cold time the entrance to the cave will be hard to see. The line of sun and shadow that held her eyes will not be on the rock wall.

At the edge of the valley she digs the black earth that burns and for many days carries the pieces into the cave. The smoke from her fires will disappear through the ceiling as it did from the torch on her first day.

From the reindeer skins she makes warm covers for her body and feet. The rain and snow do not make the skins wet inside. This is how the reindeer stand in their own circle when the snow is falling, waiting for the sun. When it is very cold she carries the meat and other food down to the entrance. The snow is blowing in her face and covers her tracks.

Inside the room she builds her fire of branches and earth. With the burnt pieces of charcoal she will make the lines of the animals. She puts the stiff hairs from the reindeer hides on the ends of short sticks as Or told her to do, using the thick water from the hooves she melts in the fire. The knee bone of the calf is not a bison knee, but she can still grind the red and black rock into dirt. She laughs when she mixes this dirt with the water from the pool and touches the colours. They stick to her fingers and she rubs them across her cheek. There is a new face in the pool covered with paint. Now she is ready.

As he came fully awake she was standing before her stone canvas, her countenance transformed by red and black. The detailed quality of the dream was certainly bound up with his discovery of the cave, his painting there, and his trip to Font-de-Gaume, but he also knew that some part of this Paleolithic girl along with

her name sprang from his daughter whose vision of an ancient drawing had been cut off before she could raise a crayon in response.

She was called An, which he pronounced Awn because whatever her origins she became her own person breaking free of any fatherly bonds and sentiment. If it was true he saw a little of himself in Or and the advice he gave, he was aware the old man could not travel with her on her voyage of discovery, despite his knowledge and influence. An was so furious with curiosity, so full of paint's possibilities and what they could help her see. He could never explain to anyone else what happened to him when he grasped his subject and became immersed in his own work. Only the finished painting belonged to the viewer. But she had pulled him behind her eyes and would let him dream the animals passing through her.

7. The Stone Breakers

For Sand this might have been the simplest picture of them all, though he knew its seemingly straightforward form and substance were deceptive. Courbet's genius lay in his ability to paint the ordinary scene that included you because it seemed so familiar and accessible while reminding you that no aspect of human experience should be taken for granted. These two men could be alive today on the rural back-roads of France. As Aurelio had suggested, they'd be wielding jack-hammers or sitting in the cabs of rock-crushers, pounding boulders into pulp, but the results of their anonymous toil wouldn't be much different. Smooth pavement instead of dirt and gravel, but so what? All roads, in the end, led to the same place. On the other hand, such obscurity would cry out deservedly for a painter's hand at least to give it a name.

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It was hot and dusty, but Théo was used to it. He and Pierre had been out on this new section of road for three days now, breaking stones to be mixed with soil and banked higher than the surrounding ground so the water could drain off freely. The higher the bank the smaller the stones in the layers that ran from top to bottom. Other men would drag heavy rollers over the mixture so the stones would lock together. Depending on the builder, some sand or clay would be added to make things stronger, and sometimes even tree bark and roots would be thrown in.

The old road wound its way through the hills to the west of Ornans, twisting and turning with the slopes, and taking the longest time for the safest journey over steep precipices and around jutting cliff faces too big for the hammer. Théo knew the Romans had built it, but it was difficult to believe that people who had lived so long ago had made something still useable today. Their buildings in Rome and elsewhere were mighty ruins, but ruins nonetheless. Even the remnants of the aqueducts that ran through the southern French countryside, towering above the trees, weren't of service any more. But the road survived, carrying French wagons and carriages where chariot wheels once rolled and marked by footprints of farmers and townsfolk where the legions had trod.

As he lifted a pan of stones he glanced at Pierre who was down on one knee, his hammer raised above a red-tinged rock, still wearing his leather vest despite the heat. Of course, the old man's battered straw hat, as always, sat securely on his bald pate, protecting it from the sun's glare. Théo could feel the sun on his own thick thatch of hair and back of his neck and cursed softly to himself that he'd forgotten his handkerchief that he liked to soak in the nearby stream and cover his

head. Neither of them wore gloves, though other workers usually did. Pierre said when they covered his hands he couldn't feel his hammer hitting the stone or sift through the pieces. Besides, his palms and fingers, like Théo's, were so calloused and hard they never blistered or bled. Their most important piece of equipment, apart from their hammers, was their boots. Thick-soled and coated with grease against the rain, they gave a man a sturdy sense of well-being and slight removal from the earth that promised he would never be crushed like the stone no matter how tired he got or soaked in passing storms. If your boots were in good order, your shirt could be torn or your pant cuffs frayed and you could still stand tall. Knees needed protection too, and the extra patches of cloth or leather sewn on their trousers by Pierre's wife or Théo's sister made kneeling more comfortable or bore the rubbing weight of the heavy pans of stone as you braced and lifted them from the ground.

Around and above them were the rocky, pine-covered hills so familiar to Théo who had roamed them as a boy and where he still found time in early evenings or on Sunday afternoons to hunt for rabbits or pheasant. With wine-sauce or gravy his sister would baste his catch he'd eat for supper and then with chunks of bread and cheese during the week when he and Pierre would rest at midday beneath the scented trees. The stream quenched their thirst along with a small pannier of wine, though he liked to save most of his share of that for the end of the day. The walk back to the village took more than an hour, and it was good to wash the dust from his throat with some red tonic.

He looked at the stones he was carrying. How long would they hold up beneath the traffic to and from Ornans? As long as the larger Roman stones? And would they eventually wash away as the spring run-offs took their toll every year or hold fast for a thousand years or more? After all, if those in charge left the road in its

original state and made no improvements, the surface would sink and the corners disappear altogether. Indeed, at some sharp bends there were already wooden braces in place and boulders to keep things from sliding away. Down the valley he could see the church spire that had been built in the previous century to replace the older, crumbling one. Even the House of God needed repairs or it would end up like those Roman temples he'd read about in school, columns rising into an empty sky where pagan deities no longer lived. He pondered the contribution he and Pierre were making to the road's longevity. Anyone could break stones and carry them, couldn't they?

He watched the old man swing his hammer methodically and heard the crack of steel against rock. He had been doing this for many years, longer than Théo had been alive, and what had he to show for his efforts? Most of the results of his hammer blows were hidden beneath tons of dirt and taken for granted by those who rode over them. When Pierre grew too old for this work, he, Théo, would still be here or at another site, swinging, lifting, and carrying from dawn to dusk. Anyone who came along a thousand or even fifty years from now, entirely dependent on the road's stability, would have no knowledge of his exertions or his part in their well-being. He dumped his load in the ever-increasing pile and wiped the sweat from his eyes. Nothing could be done to prove he'd ever been here, and that disturbed him more than he cared to admit. When the sun reached its high point and there was no shade except beneath a stand of small pines, they stopped for half an hour. Anxious to quell his feelings of inadequacy, he decided to find out whether his more experienced companion had any similar doubts as to what he'd been about all these years.

As Pierre tipped some wine into his tin cup, Théo asked him how long he'd been working on the roads, although he already had a good idea.

"These forty years and more," the old man replied. "My father broke the stones before me until his knees gave out and the arthritis crippled his fingers. He carried on in pain for quite a while, then one day he couldn't do it anymore." Pierre grunted and took a long swallow of wine. "I remember him coming home one day and telling me I'd have to leave my work in the fields. There wasn't enough money there, he said. Only the stones could put food on our table now."

"It must have been hard when you started just like that."

"Yes, my hands were tough enough and I was strong. But I was used to doing a variety of things, ploughing, forking hay into wagons, tending to the horses, not kneeling in one place for hours at a time and making the same motion over and over again." He rubbed his knee for a few moments. "I've been lucky, though. These old bones are sore at the end of the day, but I can still get up each morning and come back to the road." He pointed a finger at Théo's legs. "I wish you the same luck."

Emboldened by this friendly comparison between them, Théo asked, "Has it been good work for you all this time?"

"Good work? If you mean by that has it provided me with a decent living, well, it's better than many other jobs I can think of. In the fields I'm outside as well, but here there's no foreman watching over me every minute. I'm my own man even if the boss checks the stone weight at the end of the day. But like I said, your bones have to hold out. If they do, you can be content with your work." He shifted his body on the hard ground and leaned back against a pine trunk. "Why all these questions? You're too young and healthy to worry about such things."

Théo hesitated. He'd been working with Pierre on this stretch of road for a number of weeks. Before that he'd been breaking stones for the repair of streets in Ornans. That had been tedious work because it was in such contrast to the bustling

life around him, some people chatting and laughing as they went casually about their business, others stepping around him and his tools with such purpose and determination they were obviously on their way to important destinations. At the time he hadn't thought much about his own immobility or whether his tasks had any importance of their own, only that the ability to go somewhere seemed to have its advantages, especially if you could trail after the young beauties with their fancy shopping bags and parasols. Now, out here in the open air with no distractions but the wind on his cheek and the mingled scent of the pines and wildflowers, his staying in one place made him feel as if he were one of the wild creatures that roamed these hills who had suddenly found himself trapped inside a hunter's cage.

"That may be true," he said, "but I do worry just the same."

Pierre chuckled and tossed a crust of his bread in the direction of a hungry sparrow. "Well, if it's not your young bones that concern you, what does?"

Challenged to put into words his thoughts and feelings about the worth of what they did together, Théo found himself at somewhat of a loss. He was afraid Pierre might laugh at his visions of Roman ruins and dismiss his fears that in the grand scheme of things their contributions to the road were no bigger than the pieces of stone crushed into insignificance by their hammer blows. Indeed, the road itself, important as it was in carrying people and things from one point to another, was no different from the many other thoroughfares that wound their way through the countryside. What distinguished it, perhaps, were its Roman origins and the length of time parts of had lasted. But what of those forgotten men who had built it, ancient versions of himself and Pierre? Was all *his* labour, like theirs, invisible in the end, just part of the common pile of rock and dirt that revealed no individual effort?. When he finally spoke he was surprised by his sudden determination.

"I want to find a way to last," he declared, "a way that says I made part of this road! It's fine for those with money and reputations, the ones who design the church spires or town halls. Everyone can see their works, and their names are in the records and sometimes even carved into the buildings themselves."

Then, just as suddenly, his resolve dwindled and he said, abashed, "There has to be a way for us to leave a mark."

He'd been staring down at the ground, talking to himself as much as to Pierre. Now he looked across at the old man whose puzzled look gave him no comfort at all.

Pierre kept mostly to himself the rest of the day, and when they walked home talked only of the weather and the few sheep he kept. Théo was discouraged, thinking he'd stepped over a line with the old man, who after a lifetime of road work didn't want to consider the worth or waste of it. So he was surprised the next morning as they neared their daily site when Pierre announced out of the blue, "You'll get married, you know. That will settle things for you."

Théo didn't know what to say. Of course he'd always assumed he'd marry, and it was true there was a girl in the village he had his eye on, Marie with her long curly tresses and ready smile. But he was only nineteen and in no hurry yet. Even so, what did Pierre mean that things would be settled? Before he had a chance to ask, the old man went on.

"Yes, and when she gives you children, you'll see."

"See what?" He was a little impatient now.

"That's what matters. That's how you leave your mark."

"My children will remember me, you mean?"

“Certainly. For years they will put flowers on your grave. As your grandchildren will.”

“And after that?”

The puzzled look came over Pierre’ face again. “What do you mean ‘after that?’”

“Maybe you’re right, but will the memories of my family last longer...” He stamped his feet so they left impressions in the dirt. “Longer than this road?” They were coming up to the curve where they had spent the last ten days breaking and hauling the stones.

Pierre set down his leather bag in which he kept his hammers, lunch, and wine, and surveyed the piles of crushed rock that were their handiwork. He spread out his arms. “This road has lasted two thousand years or more. Be careful you don’t ask for too much.” He pulled at the drawstring of his satchel, took out a hammer, and placed the bag in the shade of a tapering pine.

They got to work, smacking large pieces of stone forcefully and tapping the broken-off fragments more lightly to remove their sharp edges. By agreement it was the younger, sturdier Théo who hauled the full pans away, carrying them to the edge of the curve where other workers would eventually pack the loads down. He felt good under the hot sun, his muscles stretched and still strong as the morning progressed, slaking his thirst occasionally from the stream. All the while he pondered what Pierre had said about asking for too much. Was it true? Who was he after all to want his name, or at least his efforts, remembered when his descendants would have no idea who he had been or what he had done? How could you ask for too much when there was no possibility of an answer? As the sun rose higher he let the questions slip away into the heat and haze and lost himself in the demands he placed on his body, the kneeling, swinging, turning, lifting, and

carrying that he had done for such a short time compared to Pierre but knew was his lifetime's labour.

When they paused at midday, however, Pierre seemed in a mood to continue their exchange. "I remember," he said, when I was your age and chafing at the bit. I didn't want to stay here. No, I thought Paris was the place to be."

"You went to Paris!" No one in the village had ever done that as far as Theo knew, not even the mayor, *Monsieur* Poulion, who boasted of once traveling outside the Jura district.

"Yes, I was there when I wasn't much older than you. It took me eleven days of walking and getting a ride now and then in a farmer's wagon."

"What did you see? What did you do?" In his excitement Théo stood up and began to pace from shade to sun and back again.

"For one thing, I saw far too many people. It was like being in the middle of a huge flock of sheep without a shepherd to direct you. Even when you found a *café* to rest, you were surrounded."

"But the buildings, the churches and monuments!"

"Yes, I saw them. Notre Dame was very beautiful. I would have liked to attend mass there, but only the rich seemed to be allowed to enter while their fine carriages waited outside. I found a small church south of the river where I didn't stand out."

"How long did you stay?"

"I lasted for a few weeks, but the final part was just my determination not to go home with my tail between my legs. I found work, that wasn't a problem. There were always cobblestones that needed repair. And I stayed in a clean room in the house of a widow who kept things in line among her boarders. No drunkenness or bad behaviour were permitted."

"What was wrong, then?"

"As I told you, too many people. My mind was always crowded with noise, even at night. I would lie in my bed and listen to the wagons rolling past my window. And the words as well! There was talking all the time. People just didn't know how to be quiet. I realized how much I enjoyed silence, or just what we can hear now." He stopped talking and they listened for a few moments to the birdsong and crickets.

Théo said nothing, though his mind was filled with images of the great city. Whatever Pierre said, he knew he wanted to visit there one day. It took him a second or two to realize he had said 'visit' to himself not 'live.' But he also knew the old man had a point to make, so he waited.

It wasn't long in coming. Their rest time was nearly over, and the kind of silence Pierre liked would fill their hours of labour. "So you see, Théo, I discovered that whatever mark I had to make was right here. And when I came home, I married the girl I had always intended to marry. We have four children, as you know, and many grandchildren. I am *grandpapa* to the young ones, and I know they will tell their children about me. That is enough, is it not?"

Théo thought it over as they rose and prepared to go back to work. He liked the old man and, more than that, he respected him, so he would never disregard the advice given. Nonetheless, though he could imagine being happy with Marie and did want a son who would look up to him, he wasn't satisfied that family life would take care of his concerns.

"Thank you, Pierre" was all he could think of to say for now.

The old man smiled and swung his hammer at the first stone of the afternoon.

That night he lay awake as Pierre had done in Paris, listening not to the rumbling wagon wheels but to the tumbrel of his own thoughts swaying through

his troubled mind. What else is there but what we do and what we leave behind? And if the only result is children their memories are not hard as stone but more like birds in the wind flitting here and there and landing just to eat or sleep. It made him feel good to let his fancy take flight, and he laughed at his vision of his descendants flapping their arms to stay aloft and chirping to one another about great-grandpapa Théo. Then he thought, what if I don't marry and, even if I do, don't have any children! Marie may not want me or she may be barren for all I know, however much I may love her. What happens then Pierre? he almost said aloud, as if the old man were sitting in the chair beside his bed. Or if my children don't love me? I've seen that in the village. They go away as soon as they can and never return. Their parents grow old and die, first one then the other, and after that there aren't any more memories. Surely a man must plan as if this could be the case for him. If not, all well and good, but there are no guarantees. For a long time he tossed and turned, anxious about the empty future he had conjured up and about the sapping of his strength for the next day's work. When he finally closed his eyes he dreamed of flying higher and higher into a never-ending, desolate sky.

Over the next few days he didn't say much to Pierre other than the usual brief comments about the weather or the slow pace at which the other men worked, the ones who had arrived to spread the loads of stone over the road-bed and press them down. He and his partner had established their own steady rhythm between them after only a day or two of working together, and Théo found it pleasant, despite his inner commotion, to lose himself in unchanging exertions, senses, and sounds—the way the heavy pans pulled on the muscles of his forearms, the creeping of sweat-drops from his hairline to the bridge of his nose, the repeated crack of his hammer or Pierre's that seemed to be a kind of music accompanied by the short whistle escaping Pierre's lips at the end of each swing. But then he'd look up from his

tasks, see his thin shadow cast on the road's bulk, and remember his night-time flight.

Slowly he began to realize that what he had to do, if he didn't want to die unnoticed out in that bleak void, was something completely unusual and even unheard of in the village. Not something foolish but done with much preparation and care. An action that would survive his children's children if he and Marie were blessed the way most couples were. He worked and ate and slept while possibilities came to him in day-dreams and deeper reveries. He wasn't a *chanteur* like the famous Villon, so he couldn't really make the hammer-blows or Pierre's whistle into songs that would be sung hundreds of years from now. Neither was he a leader of men like the great Napoleon, so no army was going to follow him into the schoolbooks where the students would cheer his feats and conquests. He wasn't even a large enough figure in his own village to have people listen to his words if he were ever to try to speak up in the tavern or where the mayor often stood and made his declarations near the fountain. He was an ordinary stone-breaker, and that was what he had to leave behind him in one way or another. The stones would point him in the right direction.

But the stones could not speak themselves, so it was Pierre who unknowingly showed him the way.

"Look at this, Théo," he said one morning, holding out a piece of rock he hadn't yet broken.

Théo took it from his hand and at first didn't notice anything unusual except the deep ochre colour that seemed to shine even in the shadow of his palm."What is it," he asked.

"Look closely. See the markings?"

Théo squinted and for a moment saw only the bright red surface. Then there was a wiggly line and another, and suddenly he saw the tiny, outlined creature with many legs or tentacles protruding from the sides of its body. “Did someone draw it?” he said, rubbing his thumb lightly over the picture carefully so as not to erase it.

“No, it died and became part of the stone.”

“How do you know?”

“The schoolteacher told me.” Pierre looked around as if someone else was listening. “You must never say anything to the priest, but the teacher told me this animal is one of the oldest things in the world, older perhaps than anything the Bible speaks of.”

Théo was surprised and fascinated. Like everyone else in the village, he attended Mass on Sundays. He certainly believed in God and that Jesus had died on the cross for his sins, but he had never read the Holy Book beyond a few psalms here and there, and he had never heard the priest mention anything about a world before Adam and Eve. Now this little thing that looked a bit like a crayfish might be from the Garden of Eden or some place before that, if there was such a place. If he was fascinated, however, it wasn’t because of the possible sacrilege of the creature’s origins but because it was still here after such a long time, not living and breathing but alive in another way that could be seen by those whose own skeletons might one day be encased in stone.

“Can I have it?” he asked quietly.

“Of course. But remember, don’t mention it to the priest. No sense in upsetting him. You can talk to the schoolteacher if you like. He’s alright.”

Théo had no intention of mentioning this find to anyone. An idea was forming about part of himself being found one day.

That Sunday after Mass he went out to the road-site, carrying his empty tool satchel, It took him a while to find what he was looking for—several thick, flat stones about a third of a metre in length, and of the kind that didn't easily crack or break. Hauling these back to his little workroom at the side of his sister's house, he set them on the bench and tried to decide which one he would finally use. Each had a light gray surface without many cross-lines but one was especially smooth and would hold the lettering well. Taking up a small chisel and light hammer, he set to work on a practice stone. Very quickly he learned he could not use sharp angles in his lettering, so he had to be careful with the accent above the é in Théo and the slanting lines in his and Pierre's last names. He also had to figure out the proper size of the letters of the names and date so they would fit on the stone without crowding. He measured and cut for most of the afternoon, and when his sister called him for supper he felt he was ready to start on the primary stone. But he didn't want to hurry or tire as he did such important work and thought it would be best to wait until the next Sunday to begin.

Marie had smiled at him in church that morning, and since he and Pierre broke stones only half-days on Saturday, he would ask her for a walk in the afternoon. He knew her parents approved of his steady job and that his family's reputation was unsullied in village eyes. His own parents had both died when he was young, but his sister had raised him in strict though good-natured fashion to attend church regularly and respect his elders whether or not he agreed with the priest's words or all the opinions of the old folk. Yes, once he had made his mark as he was planning to do, he could follow Pierre's advice and leave to fate the question of his children's memories.

Most times he and Pierre worked by the surface of the road, but at others they were down below especially when great banked curves were necessary where the

spring water roared through gullies with force enough to shift large rocks. Here there had to be enough space between the rough hill slopes and the smooth opposition of the roadbed to allow for such unpredictable assault. At these curves the bulwark layers of stone and other matter were eight to ten feet deep from top to bottom and easily thirty feet across. For two mornings, as he swung his hammer and carried his pans, he studied potential sites for his tunnel. He wanted to burrow in far enough so crashing boulders, erosion, and even earthquakes couldn't damage his handiwork. His name was going to last! He looked over at Pierre and smiled. So too was the old man's even when his grandchildren's grandchildren had been forgotten.

On Saturday afternoon he met Marie at the fountain in the village square as they had arranged in a quick exchange at her parents' door the previous night. They walked down the road to Ornans a little way and sat together on the parapet of the bridge over the nearly-dry river. They would go no farther but stay in the sight of others and, for a while at least, not hold hands or even brush against one another. She asked after his sister and he of her family, and they spoke about the daily rituals of village life so familiar to them both. After a bit of silence, while the foliage rustled above their heads and birds seemed to dance through a blue sky you could almost reach out and touch, he asked her if she ever thought of leaving the village.

"Leave, Théo? Why would I want to?"

"I don't know. To see something of the world, I suppose. To find where you fit in."

"Don't you fit in here?" she asked gently.

"Yes, I do, but...did you know Pierre went to Paris one time?"

"No, but he obviously came back here and settled down, didn't he? And he's a grandpapa now."

"Yes, he came back." He didn't want to talk about being a grandpapa, and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell her of his plans for the stone. But he decided to wait and surprise her when he was done. She'd know then that the man she would marry had already left his mark.

The next afternoon he set the chosen stone on his bench and chiselled the names and date slowly and with as much care as he could muster. When he had finished the letters and numbers were the depth of a pencil tip and each stroke about half the width of his smallest fingertip. He smoothed the surface edges with emery paper and polished the entire stone with a light sheen of oil. When he had finished he stared down at what he was sure others would see so many years from now he could not even begin to count: THÉO MERCIER ET PIERRE DARNAY 1849. It was all he could do.

It had to be that night. There was less traffic on the road after dark on Sundays than during the rest of the week. Most people were home with families resting up for the days of labour to come. He had already cut many small pieces of timber to shore up the tunnel roof. That would be all he needed except for his short-handled shovel and a lantern. Before he left his workroom he wrapped the stone in a thick piece of waterproof oilcloth. There was no need to tie it as the weight of the earth would hold it in place and rope would rot more quickly than the tightly woven and protected material, though he knew that would finally disintegrate as well. Carefully, he placed the eternal stone in a cloth satchel.

Setting out after dark, he pushed the timber, tools, and satchel in a barrow, making his way along the road in the dim starlight. By the time he carried everything down the slope he thought there was about seven hours until sunrise. Of

course he'd have to be back in the village by then, washed up and ready to meet Pierre in the square. To help matters along he had some bread and cheese in his pockets that he could eat on the way home. There wouldn't be any morning coffee though, which was too bad because tomorrow was going to be a hard enough day when he'd had no sleep.

Halfway down from the surface of the road he began to dig. In the lantern light he noticed his fresh footprints mixed with those left behind by him and Pierre the day before, so there was no need to remove these signs of his presence as long as he hid any traces of the tunnel entrance. It was harder going than he'd expected because he had to keep propping up the roof and was afraid for a while he'd run out of timber pieces. But the deeper in he got the more stable the roof became, and his slow progress was due to the cramped space more than anything else. It was hot, especially because he had to keep the lantern in front of his face and reach out awkwardly beyond it with the shovel to attack the dirt and stone.

After three hours he was in the full length of his body and had created a space wide enough for his shoulders to pass comfortably. Only his boot-heels would be visible to the outside world. He was very thirsty and cursed himself for not bringing a bottle of water. It would be easy to back out and find the stream, but time was passing quickly and he wanted to finish his work as soon as he could, so he kept advancing. After every foot or so he would reach behind and pull the satchel forward so it was always resting against his leg or foot. Snatches of thought about Marie came to him and of how he would tell her, perhaps on their marriage day, of what he'd done. She might not understand at first, but she would know that he was no ordinary man who would love her and father their children. Pierre was a different matter. He'd understand right away and wouldn't necessarily approve. But Théo would placate him by saying what harm could it do? At worst it was just

a piece of stone wrapped in oilcloth that was buried deeper than any grave. But at best, one day men would read their names and perhaps put the stone in an honoured place, even a museum!

He dug on until it was harder to breathe and his arms were very tired. By now he could sense rather than see that he was entirely contained by the roadbed and that the tip of his shovel three feet from his face was probably twelve feet from the entrance. When he ran out of timber he pushed forward another yard or so on faith that the roof would hold until he inched out and collapsed it by pulling down the roof supports as he passed them. Dropping the shovel he reached back for the satchel and pulled it up into the space in front of him. Taking out the stone, he unfolded the cloth and looked at the letters that shone in the light of the low lantern flame. His right thumb and fingers pressed into the letters of THÉO as if to draw strength from their chiselled presence. It was time to let them go, to leave them for the others who would wonder who he was but never doubt *that* he was. He and Pierre together.

It was after he had wrapped the stone again and pushed it up against the very end of the tunnel that he heard a soft roar behind him and felt the crushing weight of the earth on his legs and back. For a moment when he could not breathe in the thick dust that filled his eyes and mouth he was afraid. A quick image of Marie and their children flitted across his mind like a tiny bird in an azure sky. He reached out to touch the stone and the bird disappeared into a blue that had no name at all.

8. Everything at Once

In the second dream it was as if she had drawn him into half-being with a piece of charcoal, placing him on the edge of the space in which she would paint. He wasn't quite in the scene that unfolded, but from where he was he could see the colours coming toward the rock and then sweeping by him into their animal shapes and the landscapes in which they shone. He could feel the paint as it passed, its texture and its tones, and its revelation gradually filled his own form and dwelling place as it emptied them of loss.

When her bleeding does not come after the first moon, An pays no attention, but after she has prepared the cave and the second moon has passed she is still dry. Then one morning she spits up the food from her belly and does this every day after that until she is weak. She cannot paint and lies on her sleeping skins looking at the walls.

So far there are thin lines of grass and a river. She squeezes the juice of berries into the paint until the colours of the grass and water are there. She does not put in

her own blood or the blood of the reindeer she has saved at the cave's mouth. That colour is for the sky when the sun is bleeding, and she must paint what she sees below before she looks up. The animals have not yet come, but their home has passed into her through the walls. She laughs when the lines of the river and grasses flow. Suddenly a bird's wing appears on the end of the brush and then all its brown feathers. It is small and sits on the tip of a tall blade of grass beside the water. One day soon it will fly with the others through the red light in the sky. She can hear their song. From Or and what she saw in his cave, she knows the paint has not made these things before.

Her eyes close and she dreams of the night when she lay with the circle man. She reaches up and touches his curving horns and feels him run to the place where the child waits before it sees the world. When she wakes that place moves deep inside her, and she knows when the snows have gone she will not be alone.

Eventually, as the food stays in her belly and her strength returns, she leaves the skins and stands again before the wall. Reaching as high as she can she pulls the brush across the stone to mark the first thick lines of sky. Her hand disappears into them. On a hump of rock she paints the blood-red sun that heats the grasses and river water with its fire. In a far part of the sky she hears the sound of rain and paints it black.

She does not ask herself why she is doing this, why her hand moves as the brush moves and sometimes she sees colours before she makes them. In the red lines of sky there are bands of water-colour the shape of mammoths' tusks. Driven by the invisible wind they ripple in the torch-light and make the sky swim with currents of a deep pool too wide to cross. When she brushes the first band she is surprised by a strength that has no beginning and no end. The second band meets the first to

form a shape of giant wings, and the third drops away towards the earth in a spear of light. Somewhere beneath this sky she is waiting for the animals.

Lying in the darkness each morning she listens to the trickle of water into the pool and the sound of her breath. The air of the cave has an old dry taste of stones, while the air outside, before and after the cold time, is bound up with the wind and tastes of everything the wind shakes as it passes over—the leaves on trees, the soft parts of flowers, the tops of grasses rubbing against one another, the drops of rain. When she remembers breathing this outside air places she has never seen are between her eyes. Even though one breath is short, all the breaths together make a picture she does not forget.

She thinks of the child inside her cave belly and the tunnel it will follow into the light. It will drink from her breasts and eat the food she brings. A child is never alone in a circle. It sees the smoke curl from the fire and hears the words spoken there. When it sleeps at night it does not dream of what is on the cave walls until it is a boy old enough to help the men or until it becomes a girl who sits with the women and listens to stories about the paintings. Their boy and girl dreams are not the same. But the child that comes out of her will see the paintings with its first breath no matter what it is. The animals and the colours will run through its dreams and beside it when it walks beyond the fire. This will be different from what has always been. But it will be different only if she stays in the cave until her child is part of the world. If she puts down her brush and leaves the cave before the child comes out the paintings will not be dreamed except by her. She thinks if she dreams alone that when her body dies the paintings will die. She thinks the paintings need the child.

This is grass, she says. She dips a piece of skin in the paint and pats the wall gently. A patch of green appears. Then she takes the brush and makes long thin lines growing out of the patch and curving around and away from one another. The child watches through her skin and bones.

The grass that lives by the river is tall and criss-crossed by paths the animals make on their way to drink. The reindeer and bison paths are wide and the stalks are crushed by their weight, but the smaller creatures like rabbits and moles leave traces that are barely visible. Bits of fur drift from stem to stem, and a puff of wind can easily make their tiny trails disappear. Sometimes there is a scrap of blood to mark a death and before that a squeal that is quickly swallowed by a fox or badger. The snakes hide in the grass away from the birds that swoop down with long sharp beaks to stab at coils of red and gold. The mice flee from the snakes down into tunnels where their red eyes light the darkness. It does not help. The scent of their warm blood tells the snakes where they hide.

Beneath the patch of green she dabs a red spot and through it paints a serpent line. If you do not step on them they leave you alone.

When the thickest grass is bound together and weighted with stones tied to it with thin strips of reindeer hide, the hunters throw it around a mammoth's legs and make the great beast stumble. You throw it like this. She whirls her arm around away from her body and low to the ground. The mammoths do not go into the tall grass except when they drink from the river, but stay in the open and lift the shorter blades with their trunks into their mouths. Those trunks can chase a mouse and lift it too. The mammoth is safe from all animals except the people of the circle. She draws the flames of a fire and a long tusk beside it.

The grass that grows between the rivers and the hills is short and soft. This is where the bison and reindeer graze and where the big cats run down the weak. Their teeth no longer curve out of their mouths, but they are still very sharp. The cats are the colour of dark earth and when they lie flat nothing moves in them except the ends of their tails. She takes another piece of skin and blots a light-brown patch, turning her hand so it swirls like dust. When the herds run from the cats, she tells the child, you see only this cloud. In the early morning or late in the day, it can cover the sun. In the cloud a cat will run beside an old or young reindeer and bring it down. The bison are bigger and stronger so there must be two or three tails hunting.

Out of the grass and earth come the trees. Two thick lines emerge from the piece of charcoal. She smudges the space between and makes shorter fish-scale lines up and down and from side to side on the trunk. This black cover on the trees keeps the wood dry inside and is good to start a fire. The animals rub against it where the tiny fliers bite them. Slowly, carefully, she uses a brush to make the flier's body and wings bigger than they are. The body is black with red spots, and she traces the outline of the wings with the thinnest point of charcoal over pale strips of wall she leaves unpainted. The wings move faster than the cat can run and they make this sound. She presses her tongue against the back of her teeth and lightly blows out her breath. Then she uses another piece of charcoal to draw the tree branches that turn and curl in different directions. When there are no more branches between her and the sky she pats them softly with the green rabbit fur. If you sit in the branches behind this colour the animals cannot see you. Only the cats with their strong noses can find where you are.

When she steps back from the wall, the paint and charcoal are everywhere. She sees what she has made and what the child can see. Her hands and arms and the

skins she wears are red and black and green and blue. This is only the first part, she says. She chews some berries and tastes more blue on her tongue.

This is water, she says. It is the wetness on the wall and the pool we drink from. It is the blue beneath the blue of the sky. She takes her brush and widens the streak she has already made below the blood-red sun and black rain. When you walk through the long grass to the river you find a deeper pool under the trees. Here where you cannot see from side to side because of the grass the tiny animals and birds drink beside the cats, but not the bison or the reindeer. They need to see the others who are drinking and the ones who are not. So do circle people. The water here is still and cool, but you do not wash or swim where you will die. The fish are not afraid at the bottom of the pool because nothing can catch them there, not even the birds with their thin hard spears. A red fish is alive at the end of her brush and then another and many more after that. Her hand darts through the blue without holding its breath. Small bubbles float from the ends of her fingers and her mouth opens in surprise.

When the water leaves the pool it falls over a large rock. There is white and red in the water after that because it is fast and because the clouds are in it with the sun. If you look at this too long your eyes are not the same. It is then you see to the other side of the water where the fish are born, and if you look at the river for a day and a night you will become a fish. The air goes in and out of her mouth. New bubbles are filled with paint.

Where the water flows by the short grass and the current is strong the bison and reindeer lean down to drink. This is the only time they are together except on the walls of the caves. If the cats come the big animals go into the river and wait. The white water is higher than their legs and the cats watch from the shore as it sprays over their horns into the sky. If they are very hungry the cats will sleep under trees

or in the shadows of rocks while the bison and reindeer close their eyes but do not sleep because the river will drown them in their dreams. The cats do not like to swim, and if they do not go away the big animals will try to swim to the far shore of the river. The strong ones can do this, but the weak ones swallow the water until they can drink no more. They die in the water or turn back to where the cats can reach them, and the water is red where they meet. She pushes the red-berry paint deep into the wall where the blue spreads and slows against a lip of stone.

The clouds and sun are in the river because the water is in the sky. If it stayed there forever the river would be dry. Sometimes when it does stay there until the round moon comes and goes and the water does not cover the knees of the big animals, the cats are not hungry for a long time. Sometimes when the sky cannot hold the water and the river roars, the bison and the reindeer stand in a circle and fight the cats because even the strong ones cannot cross to the far shore. This time the cats die too, but the rain cannot wash way all the blood of the circle when it is broken.

We cannot always see the water, but we hear it if we listen. Just like the bottom of the pool we drink from goes deeper into the cave, there are rivers that do this too. Under the blue streak she presses the charcoal into a black line that drops into the crack where the wall meets the floor. As long as the charcoal lasts she follows the line and when there is only black dust left between her fingers she can still hear it calling.

You will come out in water, she tells the child.

This is sky where all the colours are. The grass grows in the sky beside the river white and blue, the animals walk and run under the birds' high wings, and the moon and sun journey through their nights and days above the clouds. She sweeps

her hand across the top of the painting then places it on her breasts. This red is the sky's blood. It moves inside us too and inside everything that grows. You do not see it in the grass or in the trees, but it is there. It is there behind the light and darkness. With a new piece of rabbit's fur she rubs the red lightly into the blackness of the rain. The clouds dance and shift on the wall. Then she picks up a piece of white charcoal that comes from burning embers covered in earth and ash. Hardly touching the rock she pulls a soft trail of white through the bloody sun and out into the rest of the sky. The white does not hide the red but makes it stronger. The charcoal and paint are not like the sky outside. In the outside sky everything does not always happen at the same time. On the cave wall red, white, and blue run together now over and over.

She mixes the white with the green berry juice until there is the colour of the round moon, then puts the circle so close to the clouds she does not know if they will swallow it or disappear into its light. The painting moves by itself, she says. We cannot tell it where to go. The round moon swims in the sky's river, but never stays still. She paints the smaller and smaller curves of the moon in the yellow colour until it is gone. The moon does not warm us like the sun, but the sun is never clear behind the blood. Without the moon we would not see the face we see in the water in the sky.

That is why we can see so much, she tells the child. In this cave where it is warm, we can see the snow and cold outside. We can see the tracks of the reindeer and bison in the valley below and the paw marks of the cats behind them. We can see the wind blow the snow against their skins and the hot air come from their mouths. We can see the river covered with ice strong enough to hold the mammoths as they cross. We are birds in the sky above these things looking down, and we do not see only the cold because it is cold now. We see the leaves on the

trees and the grass blowing in a warmer wind. We see the animals drinking from the river without ice. We see the berries growing and the circle people growing too. That is why we can paint, she says, because we can see how it was before the snow and how it will be after the snow has gone. The cave has no grass or berries or sky, but we bring them here. It has no light, but we bring that too and put it with the other things on the wall. Because of the water-face in the moon, we can do these things.

One bird on the wall sits in the grass and sings. She cannot hear the song but knows it is there. Now she takes the brush and paints the birds that are wet with all the colours of the sky. Their feathers are green and blue and red and black and white, and the pale colour of the moon. There are not as many animals or fish below. Only the blades of grass are as many as the birds. But the blades of grass curve around one another even when the air is still, while the wings of the birds never touch in the strongest wind. Out of the black clouds of rain, through the blue-white river, around the watching moon, and up to the blood-red sun they fly, her hand and eyes moving with them, sometimes so high the animals become just spots of paint on the distant earth, sometimes so close to the ground she sees the tiny fliers around their mouths and tails. Then her hand drops to her side and for a long time her eyes look only at the last mark she has made. She puts down the brush. The birds are always in the sky, she says, but we are not. Sometimes we cannot see at all.

She thinks about the animals that live inside the walls between her and those she sees outside without leaving the cave. She wonders if they get inside the walls because they leave the herds in the valley to enter the rock or because they leave the space between her eyes to join the herds below. Was the bison that showed her

the way to the cave a creature already in the walls that came outside to guide her, or did she see him like she does now the other animals in the valley? She has been waiting for the bison and the reindeer to pass through her, but if they already have then she can call them back from the snow and warm wind. She can call the mammoth from the ice of the river and away from the blades of grass that his trunk picks up one by one. She can call the birds here to their other home on the wall.

The mammoth comes like thunder in the night. She wakes in the dark and hears its footsteps pounding in her heart. Lighting the torches, she places them in their slings on either end of the painting then stands before the stone and size of the beast. It is two times above her head, higher than the ceiling, which has disappeared in a grey mist. Its thick trunk rests on one curved tusk, and its long fur hangs down in dirty white waterfalls almost reaching the ground. She knows it is inside her but reaches out to touch the rough hide of its leg, watching as her hand passes through skin and bone to the smooth rock behind. She leaves her hand there and makes the great creature smaller and smaller until it grazes inside the half-circle her other hand draws in the air. The black charcoal puts the mammoth under a tree near the river, the heavy lines of its head and back meeting those of trunk and tusks and down to legs so quickly she does not see them leap to the waiting wall. The brown paint becomes lighter and lighter from the mixing of black and white, and she fills the body with this brown beneath the white charcoal lines of fur that then cover everything but eyes, tusks, and the huge ears that hear the cats' paws in the grass.

The tusks are so long and curved, their ends almost touching, that the animal's head cannot bend between them so its mouth can pick up food from the ground. She wants to show how only the trunk can do this, but the painting will not move,

so she paints two trunks, one hanging down and holding tiny blades of grass between the tusks, the other curling up the grass into the mouth. This movement makes her wonder how she can paint a mammoth walking to the river or a herd of reindeer or bison running from the cats. How do they get from one place on the wall to another? With the black charcoal she draws four more legs of the beast turning from the tree and away from the legs that stand still. When the mammoth is thirsty, this is how she sees it step toward the water.

Then she knows that other things in the painting change because the mammoth changes. The grass that grows up untouched between the legs standing still is crushed and broken by the moving feet. There is a path through the grass the mammoth has made again and again on its way to the river. With the brush that paints the grass she shows the trampled stalks and blades, each one pointing in a different direction, the green and brown colours of their death the same as those still left alive. At first she does not know how to paint the air that stirs as the creature passes from tree to water, but shining bits of rock in the wall are like tiny pieces of flowers blowing in a warm wind outside the cave. She paints the flower dust shining above the highest stalks to show the air spinning from the thirsty body. Even the river changes at the end of the path. The two front feet of the mammoth press deep into the mud each time it drinks, a thick brown mud she makes by painting the same lines on top of one another before the thin blue of the water fills the footprints and wets the grass at their edges.

She wonders if the animal sees its face in the river as it drinks, two trunks meeting before the splash breaks the smooth top of the water, a face she sees looking up from the bottom of the river long after the mammoth has followed the path back to the tree. So she paints the face in the water with its two eyes on either

side of the trunk reaching up to drink from the air, the tusks bright in the currents. It is silent under the water except for the pounding of her heart.

There are two reindeer, a male and a female. When she returns from the entrance where she keeps their frozen bodies they are waiting in front of the wall. She is kneeling and he is licking the top of her head. Hunting out on the plain she never saw two animals touch except when they lowered their horns in anger. Now she watches with the child as the tongue slowly washes the fur beneath the smaller horns that only the rain has made wet before. When the reindeer swim the river to escape the cats, their heads are never under the water. Then the female stands and they walk into the painting together.

They pass the mammoth that rests for a moment beneath the tree and move out into the short grass of the plain where the herd is grazing. She paints them before she paints the herd, charcoal lines and brown bodies marked by white on head and chest. His head is lowered to the grass while hers is up and looking to the distance where the cats have not yet appeared. She knows if the wind is blowing from that distance they will see the cats first with their noses. What is the paint for smell? It is the colour of the cats she will make the same as the female's nose. What is the colour for fear? It is the red that never leaves the reindeer eyes even when the herd in the grass is all there is. The wind blows the smell and the fear from one animal to another. The small noses of the circle people fill with the animals when they are close to them. When the wind blows the people to the animals from far away, they will turn and run before a spear is raised. If the wind turns, she has seen the herd stay still even after one reindeer falls.

It is hard to be one of them, she tells the child. They are very fast but not faster than the cats. When the days are warm and the grass is good, they die from teeth

and claws and our sharp spears. When the snow covers the ground and the cats and people are sleepy, they die because the grass sleeps too. Many of their children do not grow because the cats kill them first like us. Beside the female and almost under its belly she paints a reindeer calf, its bony legs no thicker than her arms would be if she saw them out there. The calf does not yet know the cats or spears with its nose or eyes, so she turns its head away from the front of the painting. But in the white of its throat the coming red fear is a thin mark that shakes because her hand is shaking.

Although every day is the time of their death, she knows the reindeer are strong because they live together without fire or caves. When they cannot run the circle is all they have. Behind the three animals she paints the herd, as many as five hands of fingers, each one with skin and horns so clear they are not like the hunters see them in the blur and noise of blood. She stands among them with her brush that is not a spear keeping their bodies alive, and they let her do this because without her they will disappear just as she will vanish without them. That is why they are in the cave where the blood of the paint will not sink into the earth.

The two cats are behind her. She is standing at the wall looking at the line where the grass meets the sky. They are waiting for her to run. If she does that they will chase her down and eat her eyes that see them. If she stays still they will go to the line and turn toward the herd. The brush in her hand is at her side as they pass, sniffing the stiff reindeer hair. Before they climb into the painting she is surprised by their blackness inside her. It swallows the words that come into her mouth. Slowly, as they walk past the mammoth, their colour changes to the brown of the tall grass and ground. By the time they reach the horizon where they will start their hunt they have almost disappeared. She raises the brush and feels the wind

against it blowing from the herd to the cats. She lets them grow larger then stops them behind a rock rising to the height of the female's lifted head.

The first cat rubs its side against the rock or leans there as if at rest. Its mouth is open and its bright red tongue hangs down between the rows of teeth sharper than spears. It knows the wind will not shift and does not hurry her brush strokes of soft fur across its body. It is waiting to kill, and the taste in its mouth is the blood on the calf's white throat. The blackness that swallowed her words is not inside her now, only a new colour that joins her to this strength of hiding death. She is behind the rock hungry for meat that will not hurt her as she runs toward it. The cats are faster and stronger than the reindeer and she is not, but she is a hunter too. They cry out when the spear hangs down from their sides and when the claws rip the skin from their bellies. Like the cats she eats the sounds of their dying.

The second cat spits out these sounds and she paints them in the air around its head, hard flat marks slashed on the wall with dark downward strokes of red and black that she can see and hear but not the animals. The yellow eyes of the second cat shine on her hand making the slash marks in the bodies of the female reindeer and the calf for the ones who will die outside the painting. But inside she sees the herd always bent to the grass, the female always looking at the horizon, the calf's head always buried in her side, the cats always waiting behind the rock. Everything is the same as the world beyond the cave, except in the painting what happens next does not happen. She listens to the sounds for a long time through the colours of darkness. Then her hand paints the rock away and the female sees the distance death will never cross.

The bison does not come. For many days and nights she waits by the wall or fire, hearing only the dripping of the water into the pool or the sounds of birdsong as she watches the flocks race through the sky. Her trips to the cave entrance for meat and berries give her a view of the snow-covered rocks and valley. She looks for hoof prints but there are none. The ledge where it stood is empty and there is no warmth from the sun. One morning she covers her body and head in many reindeer skins with the short hair on one side that does not let the water in. She wraps her feet and covers her hands with rabbit fur. The way down to the edge of the valley takes a long time to walk. The sun without warmth hurts her eyes when she sees its light in the snow. Her footsteps twist and turn behind her as if she is in the cave's tunnel. Sometimes the snow is above her knees. Sometimes she walks across hard bare earth the wind has swept clean. At the top of the valley she stops and looks for smoke but knows that everyone is sleeping in their own caves and she is alone in the white space.

For the first time she sees other colours in the whiteness. If she turns her back to the sun and lets the light flow over her shoulders long rivers of red, blue, and yellow streak across the snow in front of her. If she looks at the sun without blinking the same colours dance in front of her eyes, the lines melting into tiny pieces she wants to mix into her paint. She takes a piece of meat from a fold of skin and puts it in her mouth. The juices run into her throat and heat her belly a little, but the rest of her is cold. The rock ledge and cave entrance are far behind her now and the sun is past its highest point in the sky. Soon she will have to go back to what she knows, back to the waiting wall. But out here there is a waiting that will tell her about the bison.

She remembers how it danced in Or's cave with the two others and their painted bodies were the sun at the end of a hot day. She remembers their legs

rippling with water when the wind came from the north and their happiness so large she could not hold it between her eyes. This is what she wants to paint but cannot join to the now of her hand and brush. She sees the bison that led her to the cave but it will not move to the wall where there is grass to eat and the cats stay where they are so there is no danger. The bison are not like the mammoth, the reindeer, and the cats that came out of her when she called them. She listens for the sound of her voice but hears only the blowing of the wind over the snow and the breath from her mouth. Then she does hear it mixed with another sound that spins in the air above her head. She turns around and around with the sound and falls in the snow. It is warm beneath the wind and for a moment she is back by the fire and the wall where all the animals turn their heads toward the front of the painting. The place where the bison will stand is empty and they do not know why. The louder her voice calls the louder the other sound echoes through the cave until she can hear nothing but its rush across the snow. She is lying far from the fire beside which she will paint or die. Her eyes close into a darkness that swiftly grows lighter and lighter and there is the bison roaring above her and the face she sees in the water.

Her eyes open as she slowly stands and steps into the tracks that lead her back to the cave. The bison climbs with her toward their home. She knows it will enter the world they have made and what she must do. Their tracks take her to the opening of the tunnel. She passes the cold torch on the ground by the entrance and follows the winding path, her feather fingers on the cold stone until there is the warmth of the fire. By that firelight, blind to everything but the colours at her feet, the brush in her hand, and the face she lifts from the water, she leans into the wall and begins to paint.

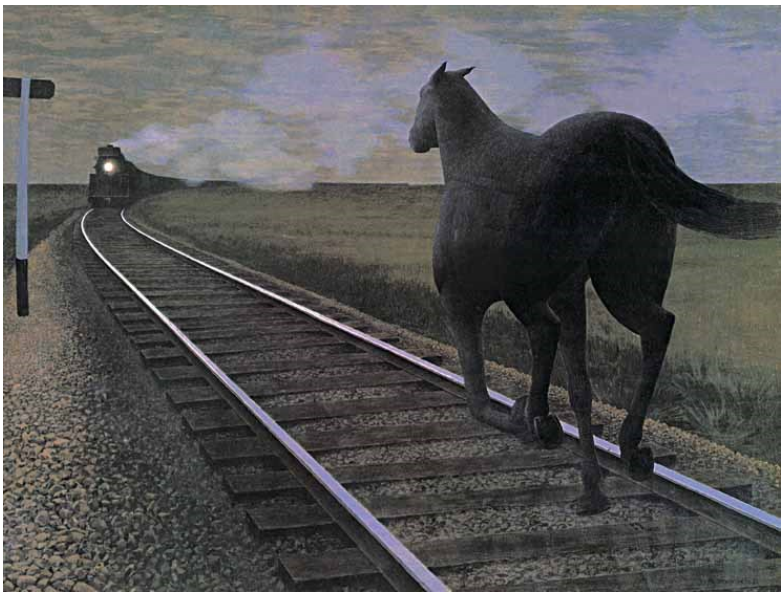
The thick charcoal line from the top of the head curves up over the huge hump of the back and drops down unbroken into the long tail. She draws the underside of the belly in shaded strokes and smudges the point of the black stick to show the thickest hair growing from the belly up through the chest to the full beard of the throat. The four dancing legs have left the earth stirred by the hooves into dust. They are thin legs to hold up such a great animal, but the air, scattered by the dust, does not pull them down like the ground. She makes the dust blue like the river, and the body drifts there on the moving wall. The colours of her painting eyes are the same as those outside the cave. The yellow of birds' wings, brown of reindeer, blackness of cats, and shaggy white of mammoth live among blue river currents, green stalks of grass, and red flames of sky. But there is no bison out there like this one at the end of her brush.

Between the hump and the belly she paints a glowing red-black mix that spills into the tops of the legs. When this is still wet she paints over it again so the marks of the brush become the lines of the shoulders and haunches and the darker curve of the rump beneath the outspread tail. The dance is faster now down through the blue-black shine dripping over the charcoal lines of the lower legs and hooves. From the fur of the chest and throat small drops of this same shine burst out onto the rock like rain. If the painting holds the other animals just before what happens next, the bison leaps into the distance between it and what is coming, into a new space that will be here on the wall long after she and the child are gone from this cave. The paint outside the lines is part of that space, but she knows there is more.

As the brush moves, the bison's face turns toward her until the eye she touched in Or's cave looks into her again. She places one hand over her own eyes and becomes the dance and moving stone. Her body is heavy and light at the same time. The wind blows toward her and she smells the other animals. She hears the

birdsong, the hum of fear in the reindeer's throat, and the huff of the mammoth's breath as it turns from the tree. She listens to the hungry silence of the cats. When she takes her hand away she paints the face she sees in the water in the bison's eye, so small that at first she is not sure it is there at all.

An is a greater artist than he has ever been, perhaps most surely because for all her ability she does not think of herself that way, indeed never consciously thinks of *self* at all in relation to what she is doing in the cave. But what the bison tells him is that painting alone is not enough. The works he is reproducing all have stories of their own that will go with them into the future along with their forms. What form will Annie's story take when he has gone?



9. Horse and Train

The horse is dreaming the train, Claudia had said, and the dream goes on forever. Aurelio had been more wary, wondering what was written on the other side of the sign beside the tracks. Were the words an affirmation of what Claudia saw or a warning that dreams can come from darkness?

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The farm grew corn and wheat. That was how she always thought of it, the farm doing the growing as the land accepted the seeds and later pushed them up, transformed, into the bright blowing world she lived in. Her father bought the seeds as her grandfather had done before him, but both men depended on the weather and the dark brown earth turned beneath the plough to yield the crop. She

was the first and last born since her mother died of ‘complications’ soon after her birth. Because the farm was miles from town and quite a way off from other dwellings she grew up self-sufficient, although she never thought of herself as lonely. By the time she was eight she was helping Ellen, the cook, with breakfast and supper, doing regular chores in the yard, and weeding the vegetable garden. She also watered old Bill, the gelding who hauled the wagon once or twice a day. The rest of the time he stood in his stall or the small corral by the barn, flicking at flies with his tail or rubbing his hide against the wooden posts.

There was a school in town, but her father decided it was too far away for her daily attendance, and sat down with her for an hour each evening and longer on Sunday afternoons to make sure she was advancing with her reading and writing. She read bits of the Bible to him and copied out certain passages he liked from *Ecclesiastes* and other Old Testament books that had lots of descriptions of ordinary life beneath God’s watchful eye. He wasn’t a particularly religious man, but he respected the Lord’s efforts in that first week, especially what he accomplished on the third day. Sometimes she’d lift her head from the page in front of her and gaze out the kitchen window to where the grain was waving in the breeze and the clouds scudded across the sky above the tawny stalks and think no wonder God looked down and saw things were good. There were other books in the house, dime-store novels her father left lying about, and farmers’ almanacs and catalogues whose drawings of animals and tools she liked to cut out and then paste to a piece of cardboard she would prop up on the bureau in her room.

The summer before her twelfth birthday, however, she noticed a change in her father. Normally he didn’t seem to have any doubts about who he was or what he did. When a neighbour stopped by it wasn’t only to pass the time or report some news from town but to ask for advice about a crop or the proper depth for a

drainage ditch. When the local council made decisions about roads and bridges, one or two of the members would generally discuss matters with her father beforehand. While his word wasn't taken as gospel, it was always given serious consideration. But she knew from overhearing conversations that there were other men of rank in the community and that they were sought out as well. From what the council members said she realized these men often banded together in their decision-making while her father usually stood alone. It was his independent strength that prompted men's respect and contributed to the unshakeable quality of her life with him, but this new issue of the railroad made her worry as never before.

One night after he'd been to a special meeting in town he came home very upset and unable to settle down. He barely touched his supper that she heated up for him on the woodstove and muttered angrily about his rights and those of his neighbours, as well as the greed of the easterners who didn't understand that this country needed to develop slowly and carefully. The next day a crowd of farmers gathered in their kitchen while she sat at the top of the stairs and listened to them discuss what was happening without their consent. From what she could make out, the railroad wanted a large part of their land to lay down tracks and, while a good price was being offered, the company had the government-given right to force a sale.

"I won't sell," she heard her father say decisively, and a number of supporting voices made the wooden treads hum beneath her feet. A few suggested they form an organization and write to the Governor protesting the legislation that allowed the railroad to destroy a lifetime's work on the land. Perhaps if they explained the damage that would be done, other citizens would support them and the route of the rails could be changed. Others said it wouldn't be enough to write a letter. They'd

have to go to the capitol and march on the Governor's office. That way they'd get the attention of the newspapers and catch the public eye. There was a silence, and she knew they were looking to her father to help them decide.

'What about it, Ed?" someone finally shouted. "You're the one to lead us."

Her father spoke softly but with as much steel in his voice as she had ever heard, a steel to match all the rails that might be laid. "You go and speak to the Governor," he said. "I'll stay here and keep them at bay."

"How will you do that, Ed?" the same man asked. "They'll just push you aside and get on with their work unless we stop them before they get here."

His words frightened her so badly she thought her throat would close up as she tried to catch her breath.

"I'll die for my land," he said quietly but firmly.

No one spoke for a long time, then their closest neighbour said bitterly, "Now I know how the Indians felt." Despite her fear and concern, a look of puzzlement crossed her face, and she rubbed her eyes as if to wipe away a film between herself and a people she didn't really know. She had caught only brief glimpses of Natives in town as they slouched by her, their shabby outfits hardly matching the buckskin leggings and colourful blankets she had read of in the dime-store novels.

A letter was written and sent to the Governor's office, but there was no reply. After two weeks of silence a delegation of farmers journeyed to the capitol but never got to see the man they felt would listen reasonably to their concerns and make a sensible decision to divert the rail line. Her father refused to accompany them and waited stoically for their return. One morning while she was cleaning up the dishes, they arrived shamefacedly at the house to admit he'd been right. But a few of them weren't yet ready to surrender.

"We'll take the company to court. All we need is a jury of twelve men who know that fair's fair," one said.

"They'd need to be from around here," her father replied, "and the company will plead for neutral territory. Given the backing of the Governor, you'll probably have to plead in the capital. Along with that there's all the money for legal fees we don't have."

"You want us to just give up, Ed? Just lie down lie cattle in a storm?"

"No, but I think there's other ways to make a noise besides shouting uselessly in court."

"What then?"

"I think we get right in their faces," he said evenly. "I mean threaten them a little."

She wondered what he meant, but the men knew, and most of them weren't happy. They looked at the floor and shuffled their feet before one of them finally spoke.

"They'd shoot us down if we tried anything violent."

There were strong shouts of agreement with this warning.

Her father held up his hand. "I told you I was ready to die to protect my land. Twenty years ago most of you fought against the tribes to win what you've got. Have you forgotten that?"

"None of us had kids then, Ed. What happens to your daughter if you get put in the ground by a railroad bull?"

"What happens to her if the trains cut my farm in two?"

Some men turned and began to walk to the door. A few lingered but shook their heads as if to say there wasn't much anyone could do now. They looked at her father, perhaps expecting him to change his mind and offer them a new set of tactics, but when he only stared back at them and said nothing, they too turned and made their way outside. She knew her father was alone in his fight, or at least in the way he had chosen to fight, and she didn't feel good knowing that they were both going to lose no matter what happened. She didn't want him to be hurt, but she also knew how strong his pain would be if half the farm was lost.

That night as he stood by her bed, the oil lamp in his hand, she asked him what he was going to do.

"I'm going to give them a choice," he said.

"What kind of choice, daddy?"

"Between what's right and wrong, honey."

"But don't they think they're right too?"

He smiled down at her. "But you see, they're not giving me a choice." He kissed her good night and turned down the wick. "Sleep tight," he said, but she lay awake in the darkness for a long time, thinking that no matter how strong he was the invaders were stronger. The earth crumbled if you squeezed it with your hand. The shining rails wouldn't bend or break.

The weeks passed, the legal action failed, and the town newspaper reported the advance of the tracks. He carried on with his work as usual, but she could tell from his flat expression and few words when they sat together for meals or near the woodstove on chilly evenings as she did her lessons that he was preparing himself for the inevitable meeting on the edge of their land. She wanted to be there with him, but when she told him this he took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"I know you do, but I can't be worrying about you when I've got to watch their every move. There'll be a lot of them, and they're not going to be very happy with me. No, you stay home when the time comes, and I'll tell you all about it afterwards."

She told him she would, but she didn't mean it. Wherever he went when that day came she planned to follow closely so she could watch and listen. It was important when he gave them the choice that there be a witness to his words against all of theirs. She knew the neighbours wouldn't be there. Already they were keeping their distance, not dropping by for visits anymore and chatting only briefly with her father when they met in town, quickly making excuses about having chores to do and not mentioning the railroad's progress at all. He knew they had signed agreements and given up most of their land.

From the hill behind the barn she could see the dust cloud around the workers and catch the glint of steel in the sunlight. One day she was surprised to see a steam engine chuff its way slowly to within a few hundred feet of the end of the rails, the column of smoke from its stack curling into the sky like a signal of certainty. She'd seen pictures of trains only in the almanacs, but even from this distance she could sense the size and power of the great machine. When her father met the workers at his fence-line the engine would hiss and rumble just a stone's throw away.

The night before they were to tear down the fence and enter the farm property, the workers laid down their picks and shovels and leaned them against the posts and wire. Then one of them reached out with his gloved hand and shook the wire until it reverberated with a thin squeal that scattered birds from nearby trees and made her ears hurt. Several of the tools fell backwards to the earth and she watched their owners pick them up almost tenderly and reposition them exactly as they had been, and she recognized for a moment that their work must mean as much to them as her father's did to him.

She was sorry these men were her enemies and wondered whether the Chinese among them felt the same way about their labour as the white men. Some of the Chinese would have been born here, but most would have left their own country to work for wages in another. How could they understand what they were doing to her father and others like him? Then she realized that while the white workers must have recognized they were taking over someone else's land they still kept on coming, tearing down fences and destroying the crops as they built the earthen bed and laid the rails. She remembered the neighbour who said he knew how the Indians felt when their land was taken over. When she looked around for any Native workers there weren't any to be seen.

Just after dawn the next morning her father went down to the fence-line carrying his shotgun. He used it occasionally to shoot quail and the rabbits that got into the garden, but mostly it hung on a rack beside the front door above the hats and coats. When he went hunting in the fields and woods the breech was open and hung down over the crook of his arm. The only time she saw him snap it in place was when he took it down from the rack, popped in two shells, and hurriedly went after the rabbits. That morning as she came down the stairs she saw him slowly pull up the breech and knew he didn't rush because the intruders weren't going to run anywhere.

"Daddy," she said as he slowly opened the front door.

When he turned and spoke his words were muffled as if he was on the other side of a closed window, but she could see the fear in his face. "It might not do any good, but I have to try. You want me to do that, don't you?"

"I want you to stay, daddy." She could feel the tears start up in her eyes and wiped them away before they fell.

He bent and kissed her cheek, and she could smell the oil on the gun. "That's what I'm trying to do, honey." The door closed softly behind him, and because she knew he wanted her to wait she made herself count to one hundred before she opened it to run past the corral, through the trees, and down toward the rails.

To her surprise not only the workers were waiting on the other side of the fence but most of their neighbours and a crowd of townspeople as well. The mayor was there and Mr. Kelly, the editor of the newspaper. So was the sheriff who stepped forward and put up his hand as if to stop her father even though the fence was between them.

"Now, Ed," he said, "there'll be no need for anything foolish here."

"Nothing wrong with a man going hunting on his own land, is there Sam?"

Another man walked up beside the sheriff, someone she had never seen before. He wore a black suit and tie and fancy city shoes covered in dust. Holding up a piece of paper, he shouted, “That’s just it. It’s not your land anymore! This document legally justifies the appropriation of your property for the purposes of railroad advancement. You’ve been paid a fair price and get to keep your house and a few acres, like all the others here. The funds are in the bank waiting for you to pick them up.”

“I’m not going to pick them up, and I’ll shoot the first man who puts a hand on my fence.”

The choice he said he would give them was now clear. She began to shake from fear but could see Mr. Kelly’s steady hand writing something down on the pad he always carried.

“You know you might stop this for a short while, Ed, but there’s a company of soldiers back with the train, and they’re under orders to protect the interests of the railroad. You’ll be pushed aside.”

“What I said stands, Sam, soldiers or not.” Her father lifted the barrels of the shotgun so they were level with the top of the fence and the chests of those on the other side. Men gasped and cursed, tripping over one another as they distanced themselves from the sheriff and the man in the suit. Someone shouted, “You can’t win, Ed.”

She would never forget her father’s rely as she struggled through the years to deal with what happened that morning.

“That may be true,” he declared. “But I’m not going to lose either.”

Then she heard the train coming, not in haste but powerfully and deliberately because it too had all the time in the world and against it the shotgun pellets would be like the pennies boys placed on the tracks to have flattened into useless bits of metal. It chugged relentlessly towards them and with its size and force briefly drew the men's attention away from her father. When the engine stopped in a cloud of steam and grinding brakes, she could see the relief on their faces.

A dozen soldiers in blue uniforms emerged from the cloud, carrying rifles and led by a man with a loop of red braid around one shoulder. They marched past the sheriff and spread out in a single line in front of the fence.

"I've been told about you, sir, and I'll tell you now as captain of this unit I have orders to remove this fence and protect the laying of the rails."

The shotgun was still raised and the red-braided man directly in its line of fire. She heard the click of the two hammers as her father drew them back. There was a barked command and the soldiers raised their rifles and aimed them at her father.

"Daddy," she cried as he pulled the triggers and the roar of reply blasted her young heart.

Her father arced backward and sprawled on his back in the dirt. She could see the blood pouring from his head and chest. The captain and the soldiers immediately beside him were rubbing the fronts of their uniforms in amazement, apparently untouched by the shotgun's v-shaped discharge. Only the sheriff understood. "It wasn't loaded," he told the captain, tapping the air sharply in front of his chest. "Otherwise you'd be dead." He began to climb the fence. "There'll be no rails laid today," he said.

Despite the days and weeks of grief that followed she watched the progress of the tracks. The engine's overwhelming presence on their land threatened to crush

any belief that her father's death hadn't been wholly useless, and she fought to keep him from the blame of abandoning her for his own belief in what was right. Clearly he'd thought everything through beforehand, leaving the remainder of the farm in trust for her and all the funds of the railroad's takeover to provide for her care and schooling. Since he had no brothers or sisters or any other immediate family, he had arranged for the cook to adopt her so they could both stay on what remained of the farm. Apparently he had spoken to Ellen, who had grown children of her own, long before the rail line had even been proposed. If any accident should befall him he wanted his only child looked after by someone she knew and who was aware of what the farm meant to them both.

As time passed, she began to think of what she could do in revenge for his death. Down by their old property line, as if to absolve itself, the railway company had placed a sign in memory of her father. She didn't know what it said because she refused to revisit the site. The tracks passed on through other properties and eventually the trains ran regularly to distant towns and territories, their roar humming through the timbers of the barn as they passed, penetrating the sanctuary of the house behind. Neighbours sold out completely, and she had to admit to herself that she might have done the same if her father's grave had been in the church cemetery and not beneath the flowering oak in the farthest corner of the remaining farm away from the tracks.

For the first month she visited it every day, trying to understand what he had done. Even though she knew he wouldn't have been able to live with the constant mockery of the trains, she was angry because at least he would have been able to live somewhere else with her. Then in this anger she found part of an answer. He didn't want her to live anywhere else, at least while she was growing up. If he had surrendered most of his land, defeated by the inevitable victory of the railroad, he

would have given up the farm altogether and she would have lost the place entirely where he wanted her to be. Yes, she had lost him, but he had also been true to his promise of staying here and allowed her to stand on the land she still had.

In the aftermath of his death the company had offered a more than fair price for the rest of the farm, but Ellen, under the conditions of the trust, was legally bound to entertain no offers. Her father must have known how hard it would be, whatever her love for the place and his memory, to listen unavoidably and daily to what had killed him, even if she turned her back to the sight of the engines and the many cars they pulled behind. Out of this conflict of love and hate he must have intended she find a purpose, something that would overcome the train's triumph if only in her own mind and heart.

She attended school in town, driving the wagon with old Bill along the dirt road that ran parallel to the tracks except where it curved away to ford the river. Upstream she would see the trestle over the water and wonder what it would take to bring it down. But even if she had the dynamite and knew how to use it they would only rebuild the structure. More than once she had stood by the tracks and imagined herself twisting out the bolts that held the rails to the ties. But she had no wish to cause injury or death to innocent people. Besides, either of these actions would no doubt put her in a detention home, if not jail itself, and the farm would be gone forever. She was frustrated by her inability to make a mark of some kind, to do otherwise than simply let the train roar assuredly into the future whose inhabitants would know only its unchallenged, mechanical strength and never the living, personal gesture that tried to make a difference in the world. After all, what was her father's action worth now to anyone besides herself? And what gesture could she imagine that wouldn't quickly fade like his blood into the purchased earth? She clung to the belief it would emerge somehow from the depths of her

loss, surfacing in a marvellous, everlasting way. It was several years before the dream arrived.

The old woman sat by the tracks, a blanket over her shoulders, the wind ruffling strands of her grey hair. The girl watched her from the hill above for what seemed a long time, but she knew the woman had been there before the rails had been laid and before the farm ground had first been broken by her grandfather. She wanted to walk down the hill but couldn't move her legs. She wanted to call out but when she opened her mouth no sound was there, only her lips and tongue moving silently. The old woman was an Indian, but the girl felt deeply related to her, as if she were a child not of blood but spirit, though she couldn't explain this connection to herself. Despite the distance between the tracks and the hill, she could see the furrowed cheek-lines and corded veins on the backs on the hands resting on the brown earth. She heard the soft chanting and the birdsong that accompanied it. Everything was alive night after night, the train delayed behind some distant curve as if in another dream she was yet to have.

Gradually the chanting became more audible and was somehow translated on the wind into words she could understand.

"You must find a way," the old woman was telling her, but when she asked what she could do there was no answer, only the repeated emphasis on need and a path. For many nights she listened to the chant, always trying and failing to move closer to the tracks until she realized that such proximity wasn't the answer and sensed the words had enough space around them to include many other listeners she couldn't see. During the day when she was at school or helping Ellen around the farm, she told herself to be patient because the dream was from the same world as the gesture she was seeking.

Then one night the old woman said mysteriously, “Find it in your mind.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

The silence was such that she heard the grains of dirt sift beneath the rails and the whisper of birds’ feathers as their wings met the rush of air from the prairie beyond. Finally, the old woman turned to look at her for the first time.

“Your way is to show the way.”

She felt foolish because she didn’t know what this meant but cried out that she wanted to try.

“You cannot destroy the train. You must meet it with a strength that others not yet born will breathe in and make their own.”

“How can I do this?”

“Make a picture in your mind so strong that all those who see the train will see it too.”

Then the old woman began to disappear and the girl knew this was the last of the dream. “Wait,” she called, but suddenly understood that the picture would live or die in the waking world. In the morning she again remembered the neighbour saying bitterly that he knew how the Indians felt. She looked through her window down to the tracks where her ancestors now included more than farmers or train-makers and her descendants more than any children she herself might have. The thought-picture, whatever she imagined, would be for all of them.

Each day at dusk she would walk down to the tracks and watch the express train approach from town. It didn’t stop there but roared through with all the speed and energy it had gained since leaving the city fifty miles away, its headlight shining brightly like the eye of a dark god. First she would hear the deep-throated whistle as it signalled at dirt-road crossings and then see the plume of smoke before the

engine appeared on the long curve just east of the farm line. It was coal-black and pulled many cars filled with passengers heading west who paid no attention to her as they passed, but kept their faces turned to one another in conversation or their heads looking down at what must have been card games or books. She did not envy them their travel but often thought about the place where the rails went no farther because they would be swallowed by the sea at the end of the continent. While she did not care about any of the country between her and the sea, she would have liked to stand in the salty shallows and put up her hand in the face of the train's ruthless advance to bring it to a shuddering halt. Sometimes she wondered if that was where the picture would be, but she sensed, because the old woman had seemed such a permanent part of the land in the dream, whatever she would find would be close to home.

As the train swept by her, the quake of its passing sent a thrum through her body from head to foot, leaving her with the taste of cinders on her lips and the irrepressible memory of her father's gesture, futile or hopeful depending on her mood that day. She knew the strength of the picture needed for those unborn could not emerge from a head-on collision with her opposition, at least not one in the usual sense of death and destruction. There was a balance waiting somewhere, one that would hold time past and to come in suspension and allow people to question the train's apparent supremacy in the world. On occasion she could sense that equilibrium in the waving leaves of the linden trees shielding the space between the rails and the house; at other times it was in the blades of grass growing up through the stones between the ties and refusing to die, or in the clouds pouring across the blue expanse so much cleaner and freer than their smoky imitators erupting from the engine's barrel stack. But the beauty and strength of such things lay in her beholder's eye and did not confront the train. What was needed was an

independent assertion of life that would astound or disturb balance into being and hold it forever in a kind of astonished grace.

What she eventually found was so much in the usual scheme of things she was surprised by its promise. Driving home from town one day, the wagon pulled slowly by the ever-aging Bill, she passed a familiar house recently repainted by its owner in bright colours that shone through the surrounding greenery of trees and shrubs. Above all the freshness was the blue-black weathervane of a galloping horse perched on the roof and turning slowly in the fitful breeze. Pulling up, she gazed at the sheet-metal form that now spun faster in the currents of air, the light rippling over its flowing mane and flexed haunches to create the illusion of life and something else besides. She saw a gesture in the face of overpowering force, a simple assertion of resistance in the image of an animal that ultimately didn't stand a chance against the elements but took their measure just the same. Looking down at the old grey gelding standing patiently in front of her, she realized it was time to release him from his life in harness, even though she would have to replace him with another who could not run free like the amazing creature etched against the sky. Slowly the picture began to emerge from the recesses of her mind where all the pain and pride of her father lay along with visions of redemption for what the old Indian woman had lost and the servitude of her horse had never allowed.

When she closes her eyes she sees the train unchallenged. Then there is a sudden brushstroke of thought as the horse enters the picture from the right of the frame. At first it moves slowly, unsure of its footing on the rail-bed and ties. Its head is lowered as it picks its way between the parallel steel lines, tail flicking back and forth in time to the clicking of hooves against wood and stone. In the distance the front-lit thrust of the train has rounded the curve, the engine hurtling

out of the dusk as the smoke plume blows southward with the prevailing wind, obscuring the clouds and edge of a distant plateau. The thought-horse looks down the tracks at the glowing orb and its whinnied retort overrides the highest notes of the screeching whistle that pierces the evening sky. Slowly it trots forward, neck arched and hide glistening in the last glimmer of the day. She can see the beads of sweat trickling from beneath the edges of the mane and hear the soft snort of assertion as it suddenly breaks into full gallop, only one hind hoof barely touching the ground, ears flat with speed and dark tail streaming.

All this is not an answer but a question that asks if an eternal suspension of disbelief can become belief itself. In the real world of the train the shadowy form on the tracks is just a crazy runaway bound to die. But what her imagination grants is a sense of immortality that holds animal and machine forever in balance. It is not about blood against steel or triumph against defeat, which were the brittle oppositions that claimed her father, but about possibilities so strong that anyone can see them if they let the picture show the way.

It is unfinished but will last until someone else comes along to complete it in their own fashion. So she leaves a part of herself on the tracks where many others from the future and past will eventually gather and subtle shades of colour will one day supplant all traces of black and white for those who cannot make the journey.

10. The Last Artist

Sand gathered up the canvas sheet and stool, his brushes, and the tubes of paint and sealant, along with odd bits of equipment like the small tin cans that held the brushes, plastic water bottles, assorted cleaning cloths, and the extendable ladder he'd stood on for the upper reaches of the Goya and Rauschenberg. The portable lights would remain for a while longer. With the flashlight in one hand, his three trips along the corridor, past the guardian pine, and down to the car took almost two hours, and he was breathing heavily by the time he finished. As the months of painting had passed, he felt no steady pain of any kind, although the occasional sharp stab made him grateful for Aurelio's pills. It was just a general lassitude that had overtaken him as he neared the end of his endeavour. While he had painted the Parvati with an undeniable vitality that drew on her sculpted dance, he knew it was a stubborn thrust of energy that sustained him rather than any of the perpetual strength she possessed. As he put the finishing touches to the rotors of Rauschenberg's twin helicopters, he had swayed dizzily and had to hold himself on the ladder by force of will, hand raised in the air, inches from the comforting arms of the Rubens woman who looked steadily past his shoulder from her reflection in her mirror.

The winter`s cold and snow hadn`t helped his progress and, despite his layers of clothing and fingerless gloves, he had to stop work from early December until well into the new year. When he returned to the cave, dreams of An within him, the power of the paintings had startled him. He could almost imagine what it might be like to discover them millennia in the future. Almost, but not quite, because he was so close to them, so much a part of their origins and contexts. In many ways the nearly five hundred years separating him from the Breughel weren`t much different from the few decades between him and the Rauschenberg. Or between him and an overturned canoe. Katherine's strict partition of life and art had to be wrong. Maybe those few precious years with Annie were just another masterpiece in the gallery of time. But, if that was the case, how could they be represented as such aeons from now?

In the end, his choice of great works had been arbitrary. Although he cared about each of them and believed they deserved posterity`s glance twenty thousand years after he`d reproduced them, he knew a Rembrandt, a Raphael, a Picasso, and many others belonged here as well. What finally mattered was his attempt to put any art up against the vortex alongside the remarkable compositions of all the previous cave-painters. If the tangible results of his vision were bound to vanish into black holes or even Aurelio's possible heaven, he could only try to make them visible for as long as there were eyes to take them in.

He shook his head to clear this flood of thoughts. Surprised that art hadn`t said it all, he realized how much he wanted to talk with Aurelio and Claudia who had understood when he raised his hands against impending execution.

"How is it with you now?" Aurelio asked.

"You mean now I've finished?"

"Yes."

"I know I'm supposed to say it's an anti-climax, that with those months of focus gone I'm at loose ends and don't know what to do with myself."

After sharing a delicious *paella* at the doctor's house, they were now taking their coffee on the fieldstone patio with the small flower garden beyond where certain spring blooms had already appeared.

"The truth is, though, I'm still in the cave, still painting, still caught up in what I'm trying to leave behind, but…"

"But?"

"But I also know as I'm painting how frail it all is. Even if the works last twenty thousand years and someone or even some sentient being beyond the human, sees them, what they reveal and represent might not matter anymore. You know, figures standing by a river or even dying under a brutal regime might be so archaic as to be unrecognizable. All the paintings would just be forms of colour—if *colours* are seen in the same way!—in other words, pure abstraction without any heritage to provide a context."

Absently, Aurelio stirred his coffee and for a few seconds held the spoon above the swirling liquid. "Didn't you once tell me of that American's maxim, 'Content is just a glimpse'? To me this doesn't mean beyond that glimpse there are only abstract forms of colour, but a doorway to what the content reflects."

Sand laughed and clapped his hands. "Aurelio, you're the necessary viewer who keeps people like me, as Claudia says, from paralysing self-absorption. I need you now, just as I need whoever or whatever comes along twenty centuries from now, to have that glimpse. Hell, all of them need you—Monet, Breughel, Goya, and the rest. Anyway, what I'm leading up to is that I'd like you and Claudia to see what I've done. She'll be back here at Easter, which is only three weeks away."

He didn't mention what Aurelio obviously knew—that she was coming early to the village this year so the three of them could be together for as long as possible.

"We'd both like to do that."

"Yes, but I have a favour to ask first."

"What is it?"

"I want you to take her to Font-de-Gaume. She should taste that atmosphere that I can't possibly reproduce, and see what inspired me. My efforts wouldn't exist without the originals. Will you do it?"

"Of course, and with pleasure. It's been at least thirty years since I last saw those paintings. They opened my eyes in so many ways back then, and if they now help us understand your efforts, so much the better."

"You know, I've listened to nearly all of Claudia's recordings. I'm no musician or composer, but it's hard for me to imagine how going back and hearing the first soprano would help me more value her voice and performance. When I hear her it's as if she's the only singer who has ever lived."

"Well, I'm biased, of course, but music is very personal, perhaps because we internalize it to such a degree. We sit in a concert crowd and take the sounds inside our heads and sometimes even our hearts have ears. Remember, "*Escuchamos con gran interés!*"

"That's why I thought about putting a few of her CDs inside the cave, maybe with some Jussi Bjorling and Pavarotti. Then I thought where do I stop with such a time capsule? What about my favourite books and films as well? Do you think the cave-painters would have left such things had they existed back then?"

Aurelio thought this over as he finished his coffee. "No," he said finally. "From what I remember of Font-de-Gaume, the cave-artists believed in the replication of what gave them life every day. If you think about it, Ben, that's what you've been

doing in your cave—replicating, because of your belief, the details of your vital existence with art. You're a painter, not the designer of a time capsule. Because of your great gift you've been able to choose seven works to save for posterity so distant it's almost impossible to comprehend. No matter how subjective your individual choices, you created the unique condition in which they could be made. Only a handful of painters could do the same and that's not only because of talent—there's a lot of that out there—but because, like you, they *see* the world in ways more entirely than the rest of us and even than most of their fellow painters. For the same reason, you'd be an informed but ordinary judge of music and literature. As for film, I'm not sure it's been around long enough for any of us to assess properly."

Sand was silent for a few minutes, watching a butterfly flit through the flowers and a bee more diligently work the territory of trembling yellows, reds, and greens. Both would pollinate new gardens, one whose evidently casual flight had emerged from a cocoon of purpose, and the other whose deliberate journey for nectar led to the random scattering of seed. He felt a part of each of them and thought idly of trying to paint that bond somehow. But for now there was the bond with his friends.

"Okay, I'm convinced by your compliment and your critique. But I wonder if opera singers, not to mention women, feel the same way? We'll just have to wait until Claudia has seen both caves."

She was radiant when they picked her up at the train station, her eyes sparkling with the energy that poured through Manhattan's crowded streets and was constantly reshaped by the fresh wind of American ideas and know-how. It was a privileged energy, Sand knew, that could twist lives in Bowery alleys and

dominate poorer countries militarily and economically, but without the Met, MOMA, and crucial sites elsewhere, there would be a poverty of spirit that local food banks and international NGOs could never overcome. He scowled at the thought he was a kind of Reaganite artist who believed in the trickle-down effect of an operatic voice or Pollock's drips of paint—surely it mattered that disadvantaged schoolchildren attending a performance of *Pagliacci* might recognize the clown in themselves and later hum a few bars in the playground, or the seeming transparency of Pollock's technique inspired more than a few imitations in rough-papered scrapbooks to be passed around. But what if those future beings that found the paintings possessed the privilege that could bar schoolchildren and nascent artists from the cave altogether?

She kissed Aurelio passionately and lingered in his arms for a few moments before turning to hug Sand. She nodded at her lover. "I know how he is because he writes to me, but how are you, Ben? And don't just say 'fine.' I want the truth. Except for the usual Christmas card, the one letter I got from you in five months arrived ten days ago and said only that you wanted me to see some famous cave-art with Aurelio."

"The truth is I am fine for someone in my condition. I'm not in much pain, though I do get tired now and then. The main thing is I've been able to work while you've been gone, except for a month over the holidays when it was too cold. I've finished what I set out to do, and I want you and Aurelio to see it. But first, as I said, you have to go to Font-de-Gaume. Meanwhile, how are you?"

They walked to Sand's car for the five-minute trip to her house and she exclaimed happily about the town's tranquility that, after a few days, would drive most of her fellow New Yorkers crazy.

"Oh, there's too much to think about right now. Have you told him or shall I?" she asked Aurelio.

"No, my dear. I left that exciting news to you."

"I'm all ears," he said as Aurelio roared with laughter.

"The Met has asked me to reprise the role of the Marschallin next year," she exclaimed. "It seems since I really am an older woman I can bring something to the role that was lacking before."

"Will you do it?" They were in the car now and following the route of one-way streets around the main square.

"I don't know. I always acted that role before, imagining what it would be like to love someone much younger and have to let him go. I took chances with the gap between who I was and who she was, and everything seemed to click. Now her dilemma might be a little too close to home."

"There's a younger man I don't know about?" Sand had to admit Aurelio's imitation of worry would have fooled the casual onlooker.

She smiled broadly. "Do you think I should find one and get some practice? No, but I'm fifty-five and that's more or less what the Marschallin is, at least by today's standards. It would be fine if I were the only one aware of that, but everyone in the house will be too." She sighed. "Most would call it vanity, but I'd say it was more the difficulty in meeting my own mortality on stage. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," Sand said. "But remember that conversation we had a few months back when you told me I was lucky because I could have a brush in my hand right to the end? Well maybe this is like that for you---if not to the end, at least longer than you previously thought possible. I'd do it, as long as your voice is still strong."

"Ben," she said, but he lifted his hand from the wheel to signal they'd arrived at her place.

"How about dinner tomorrow night? You can shatter some glass with a high C and I'll paint the shards."

She hugged him again after he'd help carry her bags to the door. "I'm glad all three of us are still here."

"So what should I expect?" Claudia asked as they carried into her dining room the dishes each had made—her baked fish, Aurelio's asparagus and potatoes, and his own tossed salad. He'd always liked this pleasant room with an open-beamed ceiling, small fireplace, and prints of the local landscape. Its only concession to more modern design was the pendant chandelier that hung over the table, casting a soft glow on the burnished oak table below.

"I won't try to influence you beyond sending you there with an expert guide."

"I don't know about that," Aurelio said. "You're the authority when it comes to such things. Besides, I'm a medical doctor, not an anthropologist."

"But I don't think you'd see the cave paintings through scientific eyes either way." He turned to Claudia. "I guess I can't keep quiet. I want to say you'll be looking at works of art so remarkable they're unlike any others you've seen, but that's not true. They are like others we're familiar with, and I guess that's the point. As good as anything in acrylics or oils, they're made instead of manganese dioxide and iron oxide mixed with water, berry juice, and bodily fluids and applied with brushes and clumps of animal hair. Without the cave, though, I doubt we'd see them quite the same way." He chuckled. "But, as I said, I won't try to influence you."

The day Aurelio and Claudia drove north to Font-de-Gaume he went south to his own cave where he wanted to test out his recently-formed plan he hadn't mentioned to either of them. At the entrance to the track he stopped to study the ground but found no evidence of fresh tires or footprints in the damp dirt, just the tiny trails of many-legged insects in delicate, unpredictable patterns. Small puddles in his old wheel ruts indicated there'd been some rain since his last visit, but higher up where he left the car it was so dry that he found an imprint of his own boot heel mostly intact. At the beginning of the winter cold spell, realizing he might not get back for several weeks, he had wedged a small straight branch at right angles to the trunk of the sentinel tree in front of the cave opening. When he returned with slightly warmer weather he arranged the branch just so each time he left for home. If someone else found the cave he wanted to know. Exactly what he would do about an intruder, he wasn't sure.

He'd made inquiries and found it was government land that, as far as he could tell from the records, had never been up for sale. So an official of some kind might come around, a geologist perhaps looking for ore potential in the hillside or, God forbid, the location for a quarry. But the summit rock was limestone covered with a thin coating of shale and the general area so rough and isolated that he thought the place relatively safe from intrusion. Who had left that boot mark inside, though, and the ring of embers on the cave floor perhaps before that? Probably nineteenth-century hikers who, most likely, who had never told any roaming descendants of their discovery. Well, if his plan worked out, no one would disturb things—most of all the paintings—for a very long time to come.

A local contractor ran a successful operation that not only built or repaired houses and barns but also blasted the occasional boulder from a construction site or farmer's field. He realized, as had happened so often before in business matters

though not in personal ones, that while he had a reputation as an artist, spoke French quite well, and could obviously pay his bills, he still remained a foreigner no matter how long he had lived in the town. So the contractor was initially wary of him and what he wanted when they met in his office. They talked for a while as *l'étranger* established his credentials, but it wasn't until he casually mentioned his good friendship with Aurelio that the man dropped his guard. It seemed the good doctor had delivered all three of his children and tended to his wife in a subsequent illness. "*C'est un homme spécial, monsieur!"* Yes, of course he had some dynamite he could sell, but unless he did the job himself a permit would be necessary. That wasn't a big deal, though the time and location for the use of the dynamite would have to be specified.

Sand had thought things through. "Actually, it's for an art project of mine."

"An art project?" The man rubbed a finger over the two-day stubble on his chin.

"Yes. I've explained it to Dr. de Montigny, who finds it very interesting indeed."

The contractor relaxed a little. "Ah, then."

"You see, what I want to do is paint a dynamite blast."

"How could you do that? It all happens so quickly."

Sand tapped his head. "I have a painter's memory," which of course was true, though he'd never tried to recall the colours or forms of an explosion before.

"But I could invite you to our next blast site, *monsieur*. You could see what you want there."

"No, I think not because I want to do this down towards the foothills where the light is of a certain quality, you understand? It's government land miles from anywhere. How can I put this on a permit?" Even if he didn't understand, the contractor might not be eager to offend the close friend of the good doctor.

"Hmm," the man said, "I see what you mean."

"I'd need just two sticks. I'd watch one explosion as a kind of trial and then be ready to hold the next one in my mind." Speaking more formally than he had to this point, he played what he hoped was his trump hand. "Naturally, I would be happy to do an extra painting of the explosion for you. For your office wall where customers could admire your work."

The contractor hesitated. "You're sure no one else will be around."

"I'll be completely alone."

Now there was a slight smile. "Well, as long as the doctor approves. But I'd need to explain exactly how to handle things. You'd have to be very careful."

The next morning they went to a blast site together where he was shown how to connect the long electric cable from the dynamo box to the blasting cap whose thin wire you pushed into the end of the stick. When you were ready for the explosion you pressed down the plunger on the box. That tripped a switch to free the current you needed. He practised the method several times on a dummy charge. "Be sure you're at least fifty to sixty metres away with the box, and keep your head down," the contractor told him.

"But then I won't see the explosion."

"No, that's true. Well, find a spot between two large rocks and peer out from there. Now, this one won't be in the light you say you need, but go back behind the truck and watch closely. We're using five sticks, by the way."

Sand did as he was told, heard the contractor call out "*Trois, deux, un*" and saw the earth lift in a uniform mound before splitting apart into a series of slender cones that propelled pieces of rock and soil skyward. It was a strangely beautiful sight, especially the filtered colour of the sky through the wavering sheets of dust

as they fell to the ground. He would have painted this for the contractor but for the fullness of his plan.

Arrangements were made for him to pick up the sticks and other equipment at his convenience before the month was out. He could tell no one else of his intentions, the contractor emphasized. Except for the doctor, of course, who was a man to be trusted with a secret.

"There's no worry of that."

"*Bien*, and remember *monsieur*, don't let the sticks lie around too long before you use them. After a while they sweat nitroglycerin like big drops of paint. Then, boom!"

Now he stepped past the pine and into the entrance, holding the flashlight whose beam was strong enough to reveal a large section of the tunnel in front of him. He wanted to bring down the ceiling and walls right here so there could be no possible damage to the paintings and no evidence of an access at all. Having seen the contractor's explosion he was confident one stick would provide sufficient blast in the narrow passage, but he'd have the other one in his pocket just in case. He found a crack in one wall a foot or so above his head, deep enough to hold the entire stick but leave the blasting cap exposed so he could attach the cable. Laughing, he'd asked the contractor why he shouldn't just light a long line of powder leading to the sticks, like they did in the movies.

The man had clicked his tongue as if in admonition. "It can be done, but it's not reliable. A slight breeze can blow out the flame or an unseen piece of dirt stall it. Forget the movies, a lot of men died in the old days trying to re-light a powder line. Electric cables made things a lot safer and easier."

"I guess back then they could just toss the sticks at their targets. The cowboys seemed to do a lot of that!"

"I wouldn't recommend it, *monsieur*. A stick of dynamite isn't very heavy. It takes a long time to float away from you, however hard you throw it. And an air blast is very dangerous." He looked quite sombre. "You're not thinking of trying anything stupid, are you?"

"I'm a painter, not a cowboy," he replied seriously, hoping he hadn't pushed things too far.

When Claudia returned with Aurelio from Font-de-Gaume she was very excited by what she had seen and full of response.

"You're right, Ben, there's nothing like it! The cave is like a cathedral with those paintings, only more than that. I can't explain why except to say I felt closer in there to the spirit of something larger than myself than in any church. Even than in my secular places of worship like the Met and other great houses. You're the painter, but I could see what had been done so superbly with the colours and lines. As far as I'm concerned there's every bit of perfection there that's on the Sistine Chapel ceiling or in the Louvre." She had spoken all in a rush and was out of breath. After a few moments, she said more quietly, "It *is* a holy place." She looked from him to Aurelio and back again. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"I understand the cathedral comparison, my dear, but Font-de-Gaume seems like a series of smaller chapels to me, though that greater spirit you mention is certainly present in each of them. If that is what you mean by 'holy' then I certainly agree. What do you say, Ben?"

Sand thought things over. "Maybe, but it's really the earthy tones that inspire me –the smell of the rock and dirt, the ghosts of those who painted the animals and

of the viewers who must have gathered there in common sanctuary from their harsh life outside. When you add the impact of the art itself, that's why Font-de-Gaume matters more than the artificiality of Lascaux II where there are no ghosts and the painted response is twice-removed from the original vision.

"Anyway, I'm busy damning my own efforts because what I've tried to do in my cave is at least twice-removed from the source of inspiration. And the only ghosts, I'm afraid, will be ours and maybe that hiker I mentioned. But I do think the paintings themselves—and I mean Breughel's, Goya's, and the others'—will overcome such failings. The power of the Font-de-Gaume reindeer lies in images and technique that have simply refused to die over twenty thousand years. You might say that nature, or God's plan, call it what you will, has refused to *let* them die."

"It's like the reindeer are the originals that have been painted over to reveal the Breughel and the rest," Claudia said.

Sand blinked in astonishment. "What a unique way of putting it."

"It is," Aurelio said, "but I'd say what you're both talking about is a kind of creative layering. What's the word in English...a palimpsest? The question is, Ben, are you the last artist or will another painter one day look at what you've left behind and brush over it without obscuring your efforts?"

"There's another question too. We keep talking about the art lovers of the future. But between us and them, if they exist, will be centuries of vandals. Sure, it's been that way since the Paleolithic, but the world's a crowded place these days and bound to get more so. My cave might last forever, but how do we protect the paintings?"

As they drove south he talked to them a little of the working conditions in the cave. How the silence hadn't been any different from that in his own studio except for the absence of birdsong that occasionally played along the outer edges of his intense focus at home; how he had to keep shifting the portable lights as he worked on different sections of each painting and the entirely artificial illumination left him hungry for natural tones; how he had to deal with protrusions in the limestone that made no allowance for painterly detail.

"Sometimes the bulges worked, on the rump of Colville's horse, for example. Or in *The Stone-Breakers* where one of the men holds a rock that seems more than two-dimensional. But elsewhere I had to use the space available, given the size of each picture, so I did a lot of praying as I went along. I could make sure the Parvati's breasts weren't over-enhanced because I had room to move her around, but I couldn't avoid slight bumps in the foliage of the Monet or the faces of the witnesses in the Goya. I even had to shift one of the arms of the man in white a little so his hand wouldn't appear swollen." He laughed softly. "Such are the compromises of art."

"Stone isn't canvas," Aurelio said from the back seat.

"No, and there's something strangely satisfying about the fact that what you'll see aren't exact copies. But I've been as true to their lines and colours as I can be."

"It's a little like the sounds of contemporary instruments compared with what musicians used back when the great operas were composed," Claudia said beside him. "We sing today according to the score as it's played in the Met pit where only the first violinist is using a Strad and the woodwind and brass sections aren't what Handel or Mozart heard."

"We know how long the whole project took you, but what about each individual painting?" Aurelio asked.

"I began with the Breughel and took my time because I wasn't just feeling my way with the limestone but also with what I was trying to do in the first place. I had a few false starts with it before I settled down. Interestingly, one of the things that grounded me throughout were the stories that each of the works suggested. Who the hunters were, how the man in white ended up where he did, connections between the Rauschenberg images, who the Parvati danced for through the ages. The Monet was the most elusive. Those figures, especially the one in black in the middle of the wharf, had impressionistic characters as well as forms. I kept thinking about what they did the second after they were brushed into being. Rather than distract me it kept me deeply involved."

He hadn't answered Aurelio's question, but his friend's soft "Hmm" and subsequent silence suggested some satisfaction with what he'd said.

They turned off the main road onto the track and followed it until it tapered into the rough trail the car could not handle. He'd told them both to wear old shoes, long pants, and long-sleeved shirts to protect them from the pine branches and the abrasive walls of the tunnel that would be lit only by the flashlights each would have. Claudia wore sneakers and a faded pair of designer jeans with a matching denim shirt, but Aurelio had put on his gardening clothes with dirt-smeared trouser knees and rubber boots.

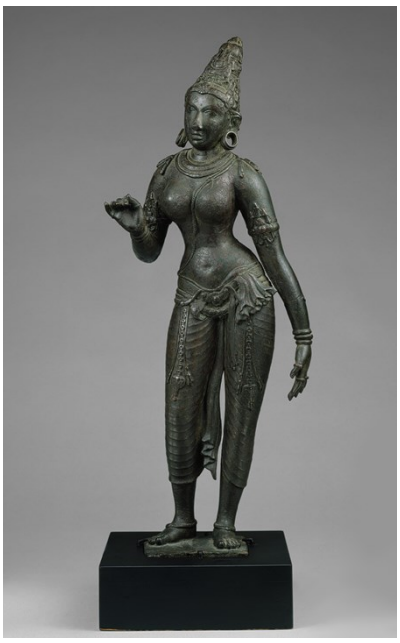
"Beauty and the beast," the doctor had proclaimed as they arrived together at Sand's house.

"But I'm not wearing make-up or a wig, and you'd still be able to do an operation in that outfit, if you had to," she rejoined.

Sand realized how much he loved and needed them both. If they hadn't been there to talk to he'd never have conceived of the project. Once he'd finished, they were the only audience he could imagine. Now, as they walked up the trail toward

the cave, he wondered who had been the first viewers of each of the paintings and the Parvati. How did they react? Did a Breughel apprentice think the old man was losing it? Old man! He'd painted it at forty and died four years later. Did the sculptor's Hindi companions look at the Parvati and say to themselves, or even aloud, 'That's not what she looks like!'? What it the same for all those portraits of Annie he had shown no one?

How could he guarantee how Aurelio and Claudia would respond? There were no guarantees, of course, no matter how ambitious or unusual the attempt. In the end the personal reaction would be left to the ages. Reindeer and bison were still around, after all, and mammoths had been reconstructed, but the world he was counting on twenty thousand years away might not have any records of what his painters had displayed. Access to other planets and even other galaxies might have rendered earth and its images entirely inconsequential or even beyond memory. But here was the pine in sight, the final uphill climb, and Claudia's slightly breathless, "Are we getting close?"



11. Tracer and Parvati

Sand hadn't read of any explanation by Rauschenberg of his collage. All he knew was he liked the confluence of street and salon, and the prescient choppers and American eagle above a local New York scene that suggested nothing of burning villages or hard hats marching for the war. But, in another light, the bulky red and white 'convertible,' redolent of domestic prosperity, could have been mistaken for a tank, and that tiny figure near its windshield a point man wielding his M16.

Fittingly on the left side of the entrance as you looked at her, the Parvati was an activist dancing against every war, a talisman to carry you through all the murderous fusillades.

*

He sat in his apartment looking down at the harbour. The sheen on the water reminded him of the Son Ba River where it flowed out of the Central Highlands, pooling in a great wind-blown lake that turned the colour of rust in the afternoon light. He knew why that colour and so much more had come back to him now, but that didn't make things any easier. Forty years ago today Sorbar had died, the Chinook he'd hitched a ride on, blasted by an RPG, spinning out of control, and slamming into the red earth of the riverbank, he and the entire crew, the pilot, engineer, two Spec 4s, and the door gunner with no chance of survival. Another chopper had gone in and brought back the remains under heavy fire, and he'd seen what was left of three bodies beneath the flapping ponchos as they took them off the ramp, laid them side by side on the tarmac, then lifted them gently into the dark-green bags, which was when he uncertainly glimpsed the red bandana. The rest of the dead were in small, charred pieces in separate containers. Of course he'd never forgotten any of it, but the day-to-day memories had been softened by her constant presence in his life that kept the riverbank like a distant shore, a border of another country that his soul patrolled while he carried on with customary tasks and lesser trials. For decades she had been a kind of filter absorbing the pain and confusion of the war and, above all, the sound of his friend's voice in their final conversation and the torn outlines of his face in death.

Turning from the window, he saw her standing on the shelf in her usual calm pose, right leg lifted slightly at the heel, the hand above cupped to hold the sacred thread, left arm curved over but never touching her cocked hip, and perfectly-formed breasts with the perfectly round hole between them above a waist so slim he could join thumb and index finger around it. Although she remained silent as always, her exquisite limbs began their familiar sway beneath his gaze, able to

escape their bronzed confines because, as Sorbar had said, she was the always moving energy of the universe.

"Parvati," he said aloud, "help me through this."

*

"What is she exactly?" he had asked as they sat together in the cockpit of the Chinook before take-off from Pleiku.

It was his first trip ferrying supplies from the massive staging field to camps in the foothills of the Highlands, where choppers were continually lifting off or landing with troops assigned to the smaller fire-bases scattered amongst the peaks. Military regs said the thirty-foot sky-ships could carry three tons of cargo in the hold and sling another four beneath, but, given his training, he knew the combination of skill and luck necessary for the handling of the Air Cav's finest assault machine when it was carrying only grunts. Recently in-country and as yet untested in combat, he was nervous about the challenges of safely setting down thirty-three men in full combat gear and, more important, of extracting them as quickly as possible from situations gone wrong. But, since this first ride up-river was more or less routine, he could relax, take in some scenery, and, speaking through the mikes hooked into their helmets, answer what questions he could from the Indian reporter beside him.

The first thing he noticed after they'd buckled in and introduced themselves was the statue. It wasn't much more than a foot high as it stood there on the guy's knees. Not eighteen inches but no lightweight piece of plastic either. He wouldn't want to be in her way if she ever took flight on her own. Goddamn it, though, she was beautiful. Big tits hanging out there for all the world to see, shapely thighs covered by some kind of braided leggings, earrings, bracelets, a snaky necklace

that wound its way suggestively down to her tiny waist, and a hat of some kind—or was it hair—rising in a cone from her forehead. All this he could see in an instant, but there was something more compelling about her he couldn't immediately explain to himself, something that both disturbed and captivated him. She seemed to be moving though her feet were firmly attached to a rectangular metal base. You couldn't ignore the curves of her legs and arms and tilt of her hips, but there was also an indefinable expression on her face that suggested the slight quizzical angle of her head and depths of her eyes were what you would always have to deal with after you'd finished with the sensuous mounds and lines of flesh below.

As if responding to his thoughts, the accented voice spoke loudly into the mike as the rotors roared. "That's because she's a symbol of nirvana, or at least the anticipation of it." Then the reporter added as quietly as he could while still being heard, "She's Parvati, man, the mother-goddess, the one who gives the balance."

The name tag above his chest pocket said 'Ravindra,' but he'd called himself Sorbar when they'd shaken hands. What was he for short—'Sorry'? "Barry'? The goddess looked back at him, asking questions that weren't cute and defensive. He was about to say something funny about her tits, but didn't.

He flew as part of a fleet of Chinooks on permanent transport duty between Pleiku and the hills, his engineer and crew chief behind him, along with two door gunners who helped throw things off when they landed. There wasn't much flak since the enemy troops were concentrated higher up country, though occasionally they'd come under light fire as they hovered with their heavy slings loads over the dusty landing surfaces of the camps. Once a machine gun peppered the side of his chopper while he waited for the ground crew to release his load, but the shooter

was too far away to do anything else than leave straight-line dent marks behind the cockpit..

"The guy was accurate," Sorbar said later when he saw the horizontal scar along the metal plating. "Another foot or two forward and you'd have had glass all over your lap."

Despite the danger, he wanted to take troops into the combat zone. Other pilots were getting their trips into the Highlands themselves, sometimes three or four times a day, depending on how many grunts were being eaten up by the NVA. When he landed with his supplies or with eighteen- and nineteen-year-old kids whose uniforms were as fresh as their faces, he would pick up the severely wounded and take them back to the main base hospital. These were boys with gaping chest wounds or absent limbs, wrapped in bloody bandages and accompanied by one anxious medic responsible for the entire load of evacuees. The rotors never stopped turning while the stretchers were loaded, and the screams and yells that cut through the brief calm continued through the turbulence after they were airborne. He knew it would be worse flying out of the fire-bases where the medical prep was minimal and there'd be shells and RPGs to dodge, but at least he'd have to use his skills beyond civilian levels and hump a line through the sky that matched the treacherous trails on the ground.

"Don't be in a hurry, man," Sorbar told him. "It's anything but pretty up in the mountains. And when a Chinook goes down, it goes down hard. I've seen it happen."

This kind of advice was given in an accent like something out of the British boarding schools he'd seen in films, only Sorbar's coffee-coloured skin probably wouldn't have gained him entry to those places, just kept him at work in the

kitchens or flower-gardens. So he was surprised to discover that the reporter's father was a banker and he'd gone to an English private school in Hyderabad.

"Taught me to be proper, didn't they? When to lift my fork and how to dab my chin with my napkin. Told me Kipling was the greatest writer of his time and the empire did all of us native boys good." He laughed. "But they did give me Shelley even if they had never heard of the *Upanishads*."

Back in the States his playground gang hadn't studied anything Indian, and though he knew Shelley was an English poet he'd never read a line of his work. As for Kipling, they'd memorized a poem of his about staying calm when all hell was breaking loose around you, but he couldn't remember any of it now.

Over more than a few beers and down times back at base, Sorbar had told him how he'd become fed up with his life of privilege and the expectation he'd go into the bank or become a lawyer with a eye on a judgeship or even high political office. "When I quit university and told my father I wanted to be a journalist he grabbed his heart like I'd stabbed him there. If he hadn't poured himself a stiff drink I'm sure he would have collapsed right away. It's amazing what good whiskey can do. Anyway, he took out the knife and began to rant at me. He hasn't stopped since, though mostly I've been too far away from home to hear him."

He'd left Hyderabad and gone to Delhi where he caught on with a radical newspaper, radical by private school standards anyway. It made a fuss about housing and street conditions, along with the corruption of various local and state politicians, and he soon gained a minor reputation for pissing off anyone who wielded power and authority with a heavy stick and for personal gain. When the Americans began pouring hundreds of thousands of troops into Vietnam and carpet-bombing the north, he convinced his publisher that Indians needed to know where they stood in the line of falling dominos.

The paper gave him a minimal stipend to cover his expenses, but he earned more by free-lancing for a couple of magazines. The deal with his paper was naturally that it would get all the first reports on any action or issues.

"But New York, man," he would say. "That's where I'd like to be. You're lucky to have walked those streets. The delis, the convertibles, the women!"

"In that order?"

"No, no. I'd start humbly and work my way up."

They were smoking some dope and sipping Coors outside the barracks. Sorbar had been two weeks up on a fire-base and was returning in another couple of days.

"Then there's the galleries," he said.

"What?"

"The art, man, the art! The Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, and all those little places on every street filled with great stuff. De Kooning, Pollock, Rauschenberg, all those guys."

He'd gone on a class trip to the Metropolitan once. He and his buddies had snickered at the nudes and laughed outright at the crazy combinations of colour in paintings without any recognizable people or places.

"Is that why you take her everywhere?" he asked, pointing to the Parvati whose coned head was peeking out from the top of his friend's knapsack.

Sorbar lifted her out carefully and set her on the dirt patch between them. He watched her sway there in the breeze. Only there was no breeze, just the barely discernable ripples of air a few inches above the heat-laced earth.

"She's my lucky lady," Sorbar said, "the one who settles Shiva's strife and destruction."

"And Shiva is…?"

"Well, he's a great Hindu god, something like your Old Testament Jehovah when he gets pissed. One day Shiva got so angry he turned his back on the world and let the demons take over. Everything got fucked up, so Parvati was born to basically seduce him into marriage and bring about peace and harmony. That's the *Reader's Digest* version, of course."

"You believe in all that?"

"Maybe not all of it. But I do believe whoever made her look like this"—he nodded toward the statue—"was plugged into something amazing and way beyond what we see or feel with dope and booze. I don't need them to see her dance."

That was true. You didn't have to know anything about the history of Shiva or Parvati either to pick up on the vibes she threw off. No, that was too easy a way of saying it. Every time he looked at her she made him feel somehow better than he was, more…well, complete. It had something to do with his sexual response, it was true, but he never thought about lying down with the woman except to take comfort in her arms. Most often he perceived something unexplainable in her questioning eyes and in her movements that defied bronze restrictions or any other bonds for that matter.

"And she's gotten me out of some crazy shit," Sorbar was saying. "Once, over near Quang Tri, we had to land in a hurry. The Chinook had a jeep swinging under its belly and we went down on top of it when the rear rotor got hit. The NVA was all around us and the other choppers were taking fire. They had to leave and call in fighter support. I talked to her the whole time I lay there with my face in the mud. Not out loud or I would have drowned. But my mind was racing with visions of her dance as she lay right next to me, and I swear she brought those jets screaming in on target. The rescue party came soon after."

"But doesn't that make her like Shiva, a goddess of destruction?"

Sorbar thought this over. “It’s all pretty complicated for sure. Here I am trying to tell some of the truth behind the lies of imperialism, but in order to survive and do that I have to rely on the tools of the invader.” He paused and looked at the statue. “All I know, man, is that art isn’t meant to be passive. Shiva had to exist in order finally to be pacified by Parvati. Yin and yang. You know, Shiva was such a cocksman that he was cursed by the sages so his dick fell off and burned everything on earth that got in its way. Parvati transformed herself into a giant *yoni* and held that dick until it calmed down.”

“*Yoni*?”

“That’s an artistic word for cunt. Just like she has breasts,” he added, “not tits or jugs, okay?”

“You should write about this for *Stars and Stripes*. You might get a new readership. All those horny guys looking for new ways to describe a woman’s body.”

“It would take a book. Even then, I don’t think you could say what’s going on. You have to watch her and have her watch you. Know what I mean?”

On that museum field trip he’d seen one painting that stopped him in his tracks. It was in a small room by itself and the sign underneath said it was on loan from some place in Spain, *The Third of May, 1808* by Goya. He had never forgotten the man in white with his arms thrown up to the dark sky as the firing squad prepared to shoot him down. In a weird way it was like Parvati calling in the planes. You had to see the execution in order to understand that it should never have taken place. The look on the man’s face told you that. It was holy and human at the same time. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess I do.”

One afternoon he flew with Sorbar from the river camp up to a fire-base in the Highlands that was at the farthest end of the army's supply line. They came in high over the jungle clinging to the sides of the hills and down onto the small plateau that the troops had cleared of brush. There was nothing difficult about the flying, despite some strong winds coming off the slopes, but he kept checking with the crew chief and door gunner for any signs of hostiles below. There was too much cover down there for his liking, though his friend told him no Chinooks had been lost in this sector for several months.

Sorbar wore his usual uniform of red bandana, army shirt, jeans, and standard issue G.I. boots he'd picked up from a pile back at Pleiku whose owners, either dead or grievously injured, no longer needed footwear. He couldn't help but notice how the grunts gathered round after the chopper set down, the whites giving Sorbar the peace sign and the blacks and Latinos the tight, arm-wrestling hand-clasp that signaled he was a brother. Some of them reached out with closed fists to gently tap the Parvati's head protruding from his packsack and muttered a few private words—prayer or maybe more secular mumblings that amounted to the same thing.

The practice was not to stay too long on the ground. Although it was difficult for any NVA to get close enough to the top of the plateau to get a direct shot at the chopper with an RPG or machine gun, they did lob mortars up at unpredictable intervals. So the rotors kept spinning while the men unloaded the food and ammunition and a weary squad changed places with the thirteen fresh men he'd carried up. Just as they were ready to lift off he heard a knocking then pinging sound in the rear rotor and immediately shut both engines down.

The flight engineer nodded at him and went aft to check the problem. Sorbar wandered back, laughing, and shouted up to the cockpit.

“Admit it, man. You’ve always wanted to spend a night up here. Great sunsets and good company. Even a little booze if there are any civilians around like yours truly.”

“Naw,” he replied. “I prefer a hot shower and a lot of booze, not to mention clean sheets that beat the hell out of your accommodation.” He gestured to the small tents and foxholes ringing the perimeter of the cleared ground.

The engineer returned with a glum face. “A bearing’s gone and it’s jammed in there pretty good. It’ll take a few hours maybe.”

He checked his watch. “That’ll be dark then. I’ll check with command.”

Using battery juice he radioed down to the river camp and explained the problem. The Chinooks were primarily day machines, given their headlight necessary for night-flying would make them an inviting target with nothing visible to shoot back at. So he wasn’t surprised when he was ordered to stay put until morning. Another chopper would arrive then to accompany his ship home.

“Okay,” Sorbar said on hearing the news, “party time! I’ve got some extra cans of Spam, some peaches, and, of course, a bottle of something special.

The crew spread out to share various tents, but Sorbar introduced him to two grunts in a large foxhole, told him to sip some whiskey and listen to their tall tales while he checked out a story with a guy on the other side of the perimeter, he’d be back soon. The second-tour black sergeant from Jersey and the white corporal from Pennsylvania weren’t on guard duty for a few more hours yet so it was up to them how they spent their time—in sleeping bags, playing cards, or sipping peach juice mixed with bourbon.

“Always knew Aylmer made a good product,” the sergeant said with a big smile on his face.”

"Yeah, and who knew about Jack Daniels?" the corporal whispered with as straight a face as he could muster.

They talked on in a relaxed way about how hard the war was on your body what with leeches, insect bites, infections, sunstroke, and just plain tiredness. No one was ready to talk about hearts and minds. "Christ, I swear the worst thing is what it does to your feet," the corporal declared. "They just rot away unless you powder them all the time, and nothin', but nothin', takes away the soreness." He chuckled for a few seconds. "Course, it ain't the same for you flyboys. It's your ass gets sore from overuse, ain't it?"

They all laughed. "That's true," he said, "you pay a price for sitting in the hot seat all day."

"Well, you just keep sittin' there is fine with me," the black man answered. "I like my flights to go with no trouble at all. A stewardess or two would help the untired part of my body, though."

It made him think of Sorbar's story of the Parvati's *yoni*, and he wondered if Shiva had ever seen half the destruction this sergeant had encountered in over a year in-country. Surely every man here deserved a taste of nirvana, no matter the form in which he found it.

"Let me ask you something," he said to the two of them.

Both men seemed to brace themselves simultaneously as if the mention of permission meant the crossing of a line and entry into a territory where easy banter wasn't the rule but the exception. It was like he was suddenly a thousand yards away and the flat expression in their eyes warned him he might even be the enemy now. But he'd seen these two in particular touch the head of the goddess, and he wanted to know what was going on. Trying to close the distance he came at the

subject as if heading the chopper directly into the wind though he knew rogue gusts could change matters at any moment.

"How long have you guys known Sorbar?"

He could see them relax a little. The sergeant took a sip of the doctored juice and licked his lips.

"That Indian cat is alright," he said. "I trust him to tell things straight. How long? Maybe six, eight months"

"Me, not so long," the corporal added. "But Top's right. He gave me a couple of his newspaper stories to read. No bullshit there."

"Yeah"—the Jersey voice was slow and easy now—"funny how somebody who ain't American can get down to it. Like the man just said, there's no jive about him. You know him too, though, right?"

"I do, but not for as long as you. The first day I met him he had that statue on his knee and I learned how strongly he feels about her." Her, not it. That seemed the way to go. He didn't mention having seen them reach out to Parvati, but right away it was clear he didn't need to.

"The first time we hooked up she was peeking out of his pack just like she was today. You couldn't help but notice and want to see more. And when you did—wham! That body! But you know, I was looking her up and down after he'd taken her out, and it was kind of strange. She was still sexy and all, but there was something else going on. Sounds corny, I know, but she made me feel kind of peaceful. Every time I saw her after that it was the same thing. Sorbar told me she settled the strife around her, and it ain't no lie."

"She's magic," the corporal said. "Just touch her head and you can feel that."

"You think she brings you luck?"

"I don't know about luck. But she makes me feel better about being in this hell-hole. That helps me get through the day, not to mention the nights. I wish he'd leave her here or find us another one just like her."

"Yeah, we ain't talkin' stewardesses here, you dig."

"Did he tell you anything else about her?

"Only what he calls her—Pavaty, or something like that—and that he found her in some shop in his home town and she's real old, like centuries old. Got that look in her eye too."

"What do you mean?"

Another sip of the juice. "More where that came from." The sergeant poured a little bourbon into his cup then topped up theirs. "Every time she looks at me I feel like I been around on this earth for a long time and will be for a whole lotta years more. Reminds me of how I used to feel in church when I was a kid. I had a hard time buying all the Jesus and heaven-and-hell stuff. But when I looked at the saints in the stained-glass windows they was part of something bigger than me."

There seemed no other way to say it. "So you believe in her, then?"

The lines in the sergeant's face, put there by months of incoming fire and the endless cries of wounded brothers, black and white, were smoothed out for a moment. But it was the gentle conviction in his voice that momentarily cast a spell over the dangerous night they shared.

"Believe?" he said. "Whatever that means. All I know is Sorbar gets to carry her around, and I know he ain't never goin' to let her go. But it don't matter because she never leaves me alone."

A few minutes later Sorbar jumped back in the foxhole with a big cigar clamped between his teeth. In one hand he brandished three more.

"Amazing what you can trade for a can of peaches," he said, grinning.

Before anyone could comment, a lieutenant appeared out of the twilight carrying two M16s. “The dinks are making some noise down below. They usually don’t announce things, but the guys in our forward position beat a retreat after hearing a bunch of them heading uphill. Since you didn’t take off, they’re probably after your chopper. Your engineer says he needs a couple more hours, so you ain’t going anywhere, even in the dark. Get ready for it, all of you.”

He tossed down an M16, which the sergeant caught.. “I can arm chopper pilots with a suitable weapon but not civilians,” he said to Sorbar. My advice is keep your head down and a tight asshole.” Then he ran off toward the other foxholes.

“So what we got here?” the Jersey voice said quietly. “Two low-life GIs, a sore-ass pilot, and a guy in a bandana who can’t shoot.”

Sorbar smiled weakly. “Don’t worry, I’ll stay out of your way.” He put the cigars in his pack and pulled out the statue. “She’s here too,” he said.”

“Yeah, I know that,” the sergeant replied confidently. Then his voice cracked and he nodded toward the steep slope in front of them. “You think she protects them too?” he asked.

A .60 calibre began firing from a hole off to their right and two flares burst overhead. He took his chopper-crew pistol from its holster and tossed it to Sorbar. “We might need you,” he said. “Don’t tell the lieutenant.”

Everything happened fast. One second there were the flares slowly falling and the machine gun firing sporadically, then they hear a mortar shell whistle followed by another and heard the rifle chatter back near the Chinook. Suddenly NVA voices were all over the slope and the incoming fire was hot and heavy. Grunts were yelling and the *snap snap snap* of weapons on semi-automatic was relentless. He saw a black shape not ten feet in front of him and squeezed off three quick rounds. The shadow disappeared but others loomed up behind and he heard the

sergeant and corporal cursing and firing and out of the corner of his eye saw Sorbar crouching and firing too, the usual smack of the .45 all but muted in the din. Beside him on the lip of the foxhole the Parvati was dancing to the dark music of the bullets flying by. She was looking out at his enemy, but the sergeant's question flashed in his brain, and he wondered crazily if she was dancing for them too. Then the Chinook went up in a ball of flame and the concussion threw him to the ground. He landed on top of Sorbar who grunted and yelled in his ear, "If I don't make it, take her with you!"

"We're all going to make it!" her heard himself cry.

Then in slow motion he saw a bullet hit the Parvati square in the chest and bounce her violently back into the foxhole. He rolled off Sorbar, reached down, and shoved the statue at his friend. "She doesn't belong here," he yelled. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the corporal bent over the sergeant, thumping his chest fiercely with one fist while his other hand clenched the M16 resting on the berm. "C'mon, Top, c'mon." he cried over and over. There was still a lot of noise along the perimeter from the .60 calibre and the grunts' small-arms fire, but the NVA were falling back and offering only a slight response from below. He knew they'd accomplished their mission by taking out the Chinook and didn't need to waste lives and ammo capturing the fire-base that they'd only abandon anyway. Unlike his own army, it wasn't their habit to dig in and sit still.

He was afraid to look at the sergeant, but when he did the big man was sitting up and slowly rocking back and forth while the corporal's gap-toothed grin shone out of his grimy face. "Thought you'd bought it, Top, thought you was gone," he said.

"Man, O man," the Jersey voice replied strongly, "I could see myself going ass-backward in a hurry when that round slammed into me. It was like I was floating

for the longest time and then, wham! I hit the ground like a ton of bricks. But I'm okay, I'm okay," he said, patting the flak jacket over his chest. "This ain't supposed to stop nothin' but shrapnel frags, but it must have deflected the slug somehow." He looked around. "Where've they all gone?"

"They hit the chopper, blew it sky-high," the corporal told him. That's all the fuss they wanted to make, I guess."

Sorbar spoke up. "She took it for you." They all turned and saw him holding the statue, his index finger poking through a bullet-hole right between her breasts. It had gone clean through without fracturing the metal on either side before hitting the sergeant's jacket. "She's one of a kind now," he said.

"Hell," the sergeant declared. "She was never anything else."

"Why?" he asked her as she stood there on his shelf. "Why did you save the Jersey guy and not Sorbar too?" But he knew that even if he crashed through the irrationality of asking her in the first place, the answer was obvious. You might be able to take a single bullet, but you couldn't stop an RPG or a chopper spinning out of control and smashing cockpit-first into the ground. The miracle was, he guessed, that she had survived the crash herself intact. He didn't want to go there right now, so he went back to his question. He knew who she was but not what she was. Or could it be the other way round? Anyway, a statue of bronze designed to represent the Indian goddess Parvati. She seduced and married Shiva whose violent ways were settled by her qualities of calm and order. The internet had also told him she was at least a thousand years old, from the Chola period in Indian history, a work of art meant to embody, as Sorbar had said, the total energy of the universe.

Is that what art did? And if so, what place did it have on a battlefield where part of that energy was unleashed in such terrible ways and there was absolutely no

balance at all? He remembered the Goya painting and how, although there was no preventing that execution, it was out there for all the world to see. The man in white was dead, and art couldn't stop that. But what Goya had done was make the man's final gesture in the face of death outlast his demise. His upthrust arms and refusal to drop his gaze before the rifles (they were French but could have been NVA or, he understood now, American) would never disappear as long as that painting remained. It meant he took the bullet for everyone who had the privilege to live on, a day, a month, a year, or even centuries after. That's one thing art did, then. It kept things alive. The sergeant's flak jacket alone would not have saved him. The bullet that left its mark on the Parvati became part of her eternal dance.

Deep in Jersey, an aging black man would never forgot that, or an ex-corporal in Pennsylvania, as long as they lived. He knew they had survived the war because he heard from each of them when it was over. The corporal had sent him a Christmas card in 1973 that said simply "All is calm, all is bright," then disappeared into the streets of Philadelphia. But the sergeant wrote to him for years, always mentioning Sorbar and the statue. "What a crazy, truthful dude he was," he said in one letter, and in another, "Put your finger through that hole for me. I still believe." Then, of course, there was his own connection to the dance bound up in his decision to find her after Sorbar's chopper had gone down. He had refused to accept she was no longer in the world, destroyed in the impact as tons of twisted metal plowed deep into the riverbank. The rescue Chinook had brought back the crew's remains with their dog-tags and Sorbar still wearing his bandana. But she was much smaller than a human corpse, so they probably hadn't seen her at all, and there she lay in the red earth, buried in the tree creepers that came down to the water's edge. Is a work of art still a work of art if it falls in the forest and no-

one is there to see it? He hadn't asked himself exactly that back then, but he had known instinctively it wasn't where she was meant to stay.

He left his apartment and went down the street to the cafeteria. After he'd ordered a coffee he stared through the plate glass window at the people and traffic. A red convertible slipped by with its rear end bathed in sunlight so bright it seemed to turn the trunk into white streaks that bled into the pavement. A construction worker in a hard hat and t-shirt was preoccupied with something happening around the corner. On the roof opposite a giant American eagle perched in a billboard as the logo for a men's clothing line while two songbirds stared at their giant cousin from a nearby wire. He could see a woman with her back turned standing in front of the jewelry store across the street as if gazing in a mirror. She reached up with one hand and pulled her long hair away from the nape of her neck and let it fall over her shoulder. For a moment he imagined her naked and thought he could see her reflection stare invitingly back at him but couldn't be sure. It was all in a frame, and he tried to hold it there before him as long as he could. Then suddenly he heard the choppers. He knew there was more than one because the rotor pattern was so familiar to him, and when he looked up he could see them one beside the other as if part of a group formation. They were very high but he could make out the 'Army' stamp emblazoned on their sides in white letters. Chinooks, probably from a base in Jersey. He wondered if the sergeant had seen them take off. They hovered just outside the frame, threatening its stability, promising another point of view.

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It was twelve klicks to the crash site from the river base camp, a long walk and far enough for exposure to the VC who were becoming more and more prominent in the area. “Take her with you,” Sorbar had said when he thought he was going to die in the foxhole. He’d lived that time and joked later about the Alamo and how he’d emptied a clip from the .45 but hadn’t hit anyone. Now he was gone but the Parvati was still alive, however much she might be covered by dirt and vegetation.

After he’d got the coordinates from the rescue pilot, he figured five hours there and back, enough time without anyone wondering where he was since he had no assignment until the next day. When he left the base he was carrying a packsack with two water bottles and wearing his .45 on his hip.

The forest soon intervened like a heavy curtain between himself and the camp, and he could no longer hear the choppers taking off and landing. There was a light yellow sheen on the water that he knew would turn to rust in the late afternoon, and small flocks of egrets flapping their wings in the shallows and calling out to one another. He stepped carefully, wary of snakes, and booby-traps. There was nothing for it except to keep going and find the statue. He hadn’t exactly promised Sorbar, but when he’d cried “We’re all going to make it,” he’d meant her as well. And if he got her out, Sorbar would go with them now. After almost three hours of sweat and worry he reached the crash site. He took out his gun and approached cautiously, though the NVA would have no reason to hang around the wreckage once the bodies had been retrieved or to mine a now worthless location.

The Chinook had come in on its side, hitting the river bank with such force that the whole cargo bay had collapsed and the front rotor was bent like a silver pretzel into a figure eight. He could see the jagged hole where the RPG had entered the upper part of the fuselage. The rear rotor was still intact, hanging precariously from tree limbs where it had been catapulted forward. The rescue party had concentrated

on bringing out the dead, so he half-expected to see the supplies the crew had been ferrying into the hills scattered along the bank and into the edge of the jungle. But the food was gone, as were the boxes of ammunition and medical goods, stripped from the wreck by those who had fired the RPG. For the first time he thought the Parvati might be broken in undiscoverable pieces or crushed flat beneath the fuselage, but the idea pained him so much he pushed it aside and began to sift through the wreckage as best he could.

Because his body had been identifiable, Sorbar had most likely been sitting in the cockpit seat beside the pilot rather than strapped in back in the hold. He climbed up to the side of the craft that lay exposed and swung himself through the open door where the ruined M60 was still mounted. The shell had exploded inside, punching a hole in the roof, burning up everything flammable, and charring even the smallest bits of exposed metal. Anyone positioned back here would have been incinerated, and he wished his friend was one of them so he hadn't had to see the red earth rushing up toward him like a bloody shroud

There was no sign of the statue, so he pushed aside crumpled pieces of steel and peered into the intact side of the cockpit whose bottom was covered by a pool of shattered glass. The pilot seat was crushed by an intruding side beam that had torn through the leather and taken out the control panel. He knew the three occupants up here had been tossed out by the impact or there wouldn't have been pieces big enough to bring back under the ponchos he'd seen on the base tarmac. One of them had been Sorbar, who would have had the Parvati on his knee, as he did on every flight, so they would have landed at the base of the trees. How long had he held onto her and she to him?

Back on the ground, he stood directly in front of the cockpit and kicked the thick growth aside as best he could, still keeping an eye out for snakes, his gun

clenched in one hand as if he could pull the trigger faster than an uncoiling strike. For almost an hour he probed and pulled, finally holstering the .45 so he could use both hands. But it was no use. She was gone, maybe disintegrated in the explosion, lying whole but untouchable beneath the wreckage, or in the hands of an NVA soldier whose communist training had not prevented him from seeing her beauty and carrying her off like the prize she was.

He walked away from the chopper to the edge of the bank and stared at the river flowing swiftly and silently from the Highlands, wanting to slip beneath the surface and quench the images burned forever into in his mind. For a long time he stood there filled with weariness and the loss of his friend with his bronze companion. Eventually he turned back to the ruin and wiped the sweat from his brow. Nothing came clear at all, and he had taken the first few steps of his trek home when suddenly this new angle let him see her high up in the trees, balanced there on one blade of the rear rotor, her right heel uplifted and her right hand still holding the sacred thread. She wasn't looking down at him but out into the entire picture of which he was just a part. Shiva might have won here in a whirlwind of strife and fire, but she would not stop dancing.

He reaches toward her, feels a breeze on his cheek, sees the rotor spin. She flies into his arms.

12. The Leap

He wasn't expecting to dream of her again. She had done her work and now could rest. Then he remembered Monet's swimmers splashing into the light, what life and art ongoing could do together.

In the warm season they leave their camp by the cave's entrance and climb down to the valley to hunt. Her mother teaches her how to throw the short spear so it hits the heart of the reindeer calf and to track and kill small animals where they hide in the long grass. Sometimes they make fires and stay below where, her mother says, a circle might come, but even though they walk as far as the wide plain beyond the valley, they never see any other hunters. She asks her mother if the animals have killed them all, and her mother laughs as they look across the plain and tells her the world is a big place that does not just hold everything they can see.

–What you do not see is even bigger- she says. –But not so far is where the mammoth stays all those days we cannot find him, and it is where the other hunters make their camps. -

-And after that? Is it where the sun goes at night?-

-Yes, and the place where the birds fly beyond our eyes and rivers born in waterfalls go to die.-

-And where we go to die too?-

-No, we do not have wings and we are not long rivers. We die where we are.-

She picks up the feather of a bird from the grass and looks off at the wide stream glinting in the morning light. She knows her mother is speaking of the cave.

In the winter they bring the frozen meat and eating plants into the cave and make them warm by the fire. She sits and looks at the painting, but when the fire is low she stands in front of the wall and runs her fingers over the rock, from the reindeer to the cats, from the mammoth to the river, from the birds to the bison's eye. She can feel them moving in her fingertips and between her eyes because she was inside her mother when the picture was there too. The colours and lines had come out first and she had followed, marking the cave floor with her wet red shape.

Before she throws a short spear she holds a piece of charcoal and presses it against the rock, the smudge blackening the dust at the bison's feet. Her mother takes her to the other side of the cave and tells her to draw there, so she does—tiny stick animals and a sun with sticks poking out of it until her mother holds her hand and shows her the half-curve of the sun in the bison's belly and the sticks swaying and bending as the wind blows through the grass or beneath the birds' wings. Soon she has drawn all she can see in the painting, and learned to crush the rock and mix the colours that make everything shine. When she is older and hunts in the

valley she brings back the colours and shapes she sees there and puts them beside her first drawings —animals and water and sky that are old and new at the same time. Her mother does not paint any more. When the child asks her why, she points to the bison. -There is something in his eye- she says. –Maybe it will come out one day.-

Sometimes she sees all the walls covered with paint and wonders what she will do then, but long before that can happen her mother becomes sick. She lies beneath the bison and the other animals for many days and tells her she must find a circle to live with.

-You cannot be alone- she says.

-You were alone.-

-No, the circle was there, then the Old Ones, then you were here.-

-I will have a child inside me and bring her here.-

Her mother laughs, then coughs a dry, sharp sound that stirs the dust beneath the dancing hooves. -You need a man inside you first, and there will be more than one.-

She touches her belly. -Here is too small.-

-Find a circle and it will grow.- Her mother takes her hand. –But first find another cave and paint what you have not yet seen. Before you go, look deep in the bison's eye, deeper than the sunlight lets you see in the river, and touch what is there to paint inside. Take that with you.- She closes her eyes and does not open them again though her belly rises and falls and her breath sounds through another day.

Through the cold time she stays in the cave, going to the entrance only to bring back meat and wood for the fire. She has seen the bones of animals the cats have left and the wind has made the colour of melting snow, but there is no wind in here

and no teeth or claws to rip the skin away. Her mother will not change for a long time, and the paintings will never change. She sits below the eye watching the bison watch her from the bottomless river.

When the snow is gone she places her mother's brushes and a piece of charcoal on her breast, takes what is left of the meat, and makes her way down into the valley. All through the warm season she hunts and camps near the water. Without her mother she has to run twice as fast and throw two spears before an animal will fall. She stands bent over with her hands in the shallows, so still the fish brush against her fingers until she scoops them onto the shore. She would like to scoop birds from the air, but they are too quick and she has to hit the big ones that are slow to leave the ground with small, sharp-edged stones. Her mother showed her how to take the hides from the reindeer calves and scrape the hairs away, so she has skins to wear and cover her at night, but she saves the long hairs for brushes she will make in the winter. When the sun stays lower in the sky every day she will find a new cave.

The circle finds her running wild in the foothills. At first from a distance they see a small animal, so quickly does it dart across an open slope, down into a ravine, and out the other side. Then the ones with the best eyes see the creature running on two legs and carrying a short spear, its long mane streaming behind. They are curious because there are no other circles nearby and a child alone simply cannot survive. But with their own young to look after they turn to the hunt and let her disappear into the long grass beyond the river.

Two mornings later they wake to find a rabbit missing from the bundle they had hung from a tree branch away from predators. They know an animal has not taken it because the thin strips of hide knotted around the rabbit's neck have been cut

with a sharp stone not ripped by teeth. It can only have been the child, so they set a special kind of trap. Hanging up fresh rabbits and loosely arranging all their sleeping skins around the tree, the men lie awake waiting for their prey. The fire burns low under the branches, the embers casting enough of a glow to keep the bait visible. In the darkness they can hear faint footfalls and the slight rustling of leaves, but nothing or no one appears, and in the dawn light the furred bodies swing where they have left them, flies clinging to the blood around the spear wounds. The only signs they have been watched are slightly crushed patches of grass and a few broken twigs.

The next night just two men stay awake so not everyone will be rubbing their eyes in the morning. Again there are the soft sounds nearby but nothing more. The child is clever like an animal, sniffing at them and filled with patience, but they know like any animal it cannot resist the bait and will be caught. On the fourth night the two guards hold their breath as a slim shadow creeps slowly past the first sleeping skins, stopping here and there, they later say, to listen for the blink of an eye or the twitch of a nose, but moving all the while deeper into the trap. When it finally reaches up to cut the strip that holds the biggest rabbit the guards shout and they all rise as one and pin the child to the ground.

She is younger than expected, perhaps eight or nine winters, and they do not understand how she can be alone and live to raid their camp. They tie her to the tree and speak to her, but while she seems to listen to their words, lifting her head or squinting with attention, she says nothing in reply, only grunts when they toss her bits of meat that she swallows quickly without much chewing. Her hair is not a mane but a thick, long pelt hanging down her back. Her legs and arms are well-muscled, and it is now clear why she can run so fast and hunt with the short spear they have taken from her, though her survival is still a wonder.

She looks like one of them except for her eyes, which are the colour of the river water when the sky has cleared after a storm or of the sky itself on a winter's day so cold the frozen sun is blue as well. It troubles them to look in her eyes, not because they are afraid but because something there shouts that she has seen more in her short time than the oldest ones around the fire. They stare at her when she is sleeping or when she sits and gazes off at the hills and mountains beyond, hardly with them at all, and what they see is not a wild child but a strange girl far from any circle.

The men want to see her hunt, but she will run away, so they keep her tied, thinking she will talk one day to say why she is alone or perhaps others with such blue eyes will arrive and take her with them when they move on. The women want her to help them around the fire because she is an extra mouth to feed, so the men free her in the day except for her feet which are tightly hobbled. She is able to bring water from the river, scrape the hair from the animal hides with the edge of a small rock, and make the spear tips sharp with the same scraping motion, this time of stone against stone. But they know she is always looking for ways to escape and bind her body and arms securely to the tree every night.

One rainy morning when there is too much mist rising from the river to see any animals in the long grass or even on the open ground, they all sit in front of a rock wall beneath a overhang that protects the fire and sleeping skins. The hobbled girl sits by herself staring silently at the rain, and the rest of the circle pay her no attention as they talk excitedly about the tracks one hunter found the day before by the riverbank. The cats are not often seen, though their cries echo through the night and are the main reason the fire is always kept alive in the darkness. The freshly-killed carcasses of the reindeer and bison with their gaping red wounds show what the teeth and claws can do, and the circle is worried that they will

become prey. The hunters say if there are more tracks they will dig a pit to trap the cat then kill it with many short spears. One of the women turns to the girl to ask if she has ever killed a cat, and the rest of them laugh, expecting no reply. Then they see her marks in the earth.

She has picked up a thin stick and is drawing something that is not clear, so the circle shifts closer, a few of the men breaking away to stand on her far side, looking down at what she has seen in her short time. There in the dirt is a picture of a female reindeer standing beside an antlered male with lines of hills behind and shorter lines of grass at their feet. The circle knows they are hills and grass though none of them men has ever made such marks in their drawings on cave walls. Only the men make the paint and hold the brushes and charcoal while the boys watch so they can do the same when they are older. No girl or woman of their circle has ever been deep inside the caves to see the paintings or drawings, but this strange girl has touched rock walls with her blue eyes and now does things with her hands the men cannot explain. They cry out that she is wrong, that the animals come through the walls and do not bring any hills or grasses with them, and one man grabs the stick from her hands and breaks it in two. She becomes angry and reaches up and slaps his arm. He is about to hit her hard on the head and hurt her, but it is then she speaks in their words.

-It is what I see- she says, and limps to the fire as the circle gives way in astonishment that she has said anything at all. She stoops and picks up a piece of cooled ember. Then kneeling before the wall she sweeps the charcoal over the rock to make the reindeer again, only this time with short bristles of hair, noses that are wet with breath, and tails that flick away the tiny black specks of flies from their haunches. The grass beneath their hooves bends in the currents she makes of the air, an invisible wind that trembles the wall as it blows. The entire circle is shaken

by the sight, the men and boys by her startling trespass on their carefully-guarded territory, the women and girls by a picture never described to them by the painters around the fire.

But she is not done. As they stand around her, oblivious to the rain on their backs and then to the clouds parting and the sun shining through in streaks of stained yellow light, warming their wet skins, she draws a high rock with two cats crouched behind it watching the reindeer. The picture says the cats are always going to eat the reindeer but the reindeer are always going to stand without threat in their open space before the cats spring at them. The invisible wind will always blow from the open space to the rock so the reindeer will never smell their certain deaths, but since they will never panic and run the cats will not cross the distance between them. This is what is on the wall when they watch her moving hands hold the long finger of charcoal, black strokes and smudges turning into old shapes standing in a new world.

Then a man roughly snatches the charcoal from her hand and another pulls her by the hair away from the wall and onto her back. The men yell at her, saying she cannot not see such things because they cannot, and the women and children join in, clapping their hands in time to the harsh words. One woman helps her to sit up then steps back into the threatening circle.

-You will not draw these things again- the rough man tells her. –They are wrong. If you draw them we will cut off your hands.-

-She is not finished- the woman says. –We must see what she sees or we cannot protect ourselves-.

-Then we must kill her- the rough man answers, and the rest of the circle shout their agreement.

-We cannot kill the animals inside her. We need them to come out.-

The men move away from the rock and talk for a long time where the others cannot hear them. When the sun burns highest in the sky they return and speak to the girl, -The woman is right. If the animals stay inside you they will not come through the walls to us.- The rough man picks up the piece of charcoal and thrusts it toward her. –Show us- he says. His voice is angry and his hand is shaking.

The girl holds the charcoal, her head bent to the ground for a long time. The circle shifts its feet impatiently and a few of the children wander off. Then she looks up at them and says –You must see everything at once.-

They think she will walk along the wall and make a different drawing, but instead she lightly touches the reindeer and cats with the tip of the charcoal and then, off to their side, makes a huge tree with its branches spreading over tall grasses beneath. The bark of the tree is scraped away at a height above a man's head and the grasses around the bottom of the trunk are crushed flat because a large animal has been sleeping there. A spear's throw from the tree she draws the river parting the grasses long after it has flowed out of the line of hills. There are many birds above the water soaring high then diving to scoop up invisible fish, their wings never touching in the rippled air. The circle watches uncomplainingly now because a story is being told. They all know the large animal will return to the tree, but gasp when the mammoth grows from the charcoal.

It is standing and rubbing itself against the tree, but they can see where it has flattened a path to a drinking spot on the riverbank or has come out of the river and made the path to the tree. Its trunk is lifted between the giant white curves of horn they cut in pieces and hang around their necks or trade with other circles, the pieces that go into the ground with them when they die. This is the most feared beast when they hunt, more dangerous even than the cats because they have to be so close to pierce its thick hide, dodging its thunderous legs and feet that kick and

stamp men's lives away, leaving footprints in the dirt so deep the dead in them are sheltered from the wind. But now those legs are as many as the long fingers on two hands as they turn away from the tree at the same time they rest there, and the circle sees that the mammoth travels back and forth from the tree to the river and the river to the tree. It will eat the sweet leaves from the upper branches and the roots of green plants among the grasses, bringing them into its mouth along with the cold water. This is its journey interrupted only by the hunt, and more than one of the men looks for a sign of his own journey in an old flank wound or fresh spear hurled from a hiding place.

They have all, except for the youngest children, seen a mammoth dead or alive before, and the men have painted it on cave walls, but now as their eyes pass over this old beast it is new to them again and again. They see what has happened and what is going to happen has come through the wall and out of the girl at the same time. She will have to stay with them and teach them to draw this way. The men think of paint in her hands and wonder briefly if they should let her into the caves when they return to the hills. They know she is stronger than them, but so are the mammoths and cats. They will keep her feet tied for awhile, but they will let her hold the charcoal. She will give them drawings and they will give her food. Soon they will not need her any more.

They think she is finished, but when they step forward she shakes her head. –Wait- she says, and points to what she has drawn. –Everything sees you too-.

Many winters later the elders of the circle look back to the girl and what she has left them. They tell stories of how they saw her running wild and captured her in the camp, how she was nothing until one day as the rain fell she picked up a piece of charcoal and made the drawings on the rock wall. After she escaped into the hills the men made paint, following her lines on the wall and filling in her

spaces there with colours so the animals did not disappear. The reindeer became the light brown of trees without their bark; the cats black as they are in nights without a fire, their red eyes shining; and the mammoth white with snow under long hairs of grey ice. They painted the blue river flowing into the green grass and up into the red sky when the sun lives behind thin clouds. In the sky the swooping birds were all these colours rising and falling together but never touching. They did not paint the bison.

In her picture the bison is closer to them than all the other animals, so close the men and women retreat from the wall, raising their hands in protection against a charge. Then as her hand moves in a blur over the hump line, down to the haunches and into the thin powerful legs, they see the movement is not an attack but a dance of hooves and dust, and laugh in relief at their safety. The girl draws thick hair growing from the belly and a full beard at the throat. She draws short curling horns above the pointed ears and a strong snout that roars with breath. Their safety is part of these familiar things. But when they see the four dancing hooves have left the earth for a leap into new space, their own heels lift and their toes poise on a cliff-top so high the sun is below them in its journey through the sky. And as she draws the bison's eye watching them leap, she leaps too, tumbling inward past all the faces they have ever seen in the water together and alone.

In her dream a red-black mix glows between the hump and belly and a blue-black shine drips into the charcoal legs. From the chest and throat the same shine bursts in raindrops over the dry rock. The eye is the river at the end of a stormy sky. This is what she will tell them paint will do. There is more she cannot say. That the bison's face is her face in the water and there is no water between them.

The woman who helped her by the wall, and spoke of the animals inside her, wakes her in the night.

-The men see what they did not see before you found them, but they do not need you now, only the picture they say belongs to them. Return to the circle you lost or, if it is empty, to the cave where your paintings are. If you run on the ground they will find your trail. Swim with the river.-

She cuts the rope that holds her to the tree and they creep from the firelight to the water's edge where a pile of leaves and branches waits in the shallows.

-The river flows away from the hills for one day's walk then turns close to them again. If you stay with the river you will...-

Before the woman can finish or the girl can speak there are shouts from the camp where torches suddenly burn the darkness. She can hear the angry voices of men and the noise of their feet.

-Be fast- the old woman cries, and the girl runs into the water, pulling the pile after her as she goes by. Then she is beneath the surface of the picture where the fish hide from the birds, one hand on the floating brush, the blue light of her open eyes showing the way.

She hides inside the leaves and clings to the wet branches as the current sweeps her along through the remaining darkness and the dawn. The sun is hot above her head when the river's long slow curve back towards the hills begins. If she raises her head she can see the mountains where her mother lies sleeping.

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He felt an overwhelming desire to tell Katherine of his dreams and what he had tried to do with his last paintings. He wanted to tell her how Annie was in An and that her daughter and all of them were part of his endeavours in the cave. But she

had been gone too long, and even if he could find her, there were so many things he couldn't explain. Most of all that he had finished his work, but something still remained to be done. He just didn't know yet what it was.

13. The Same Fire

He gave them their flashlights and pushed aside the thick lower branches of the tree.

"How did you find it?" Claudia asked. "No one could ever guess it was here."

"It was something like the rabbit-hole in *Alice in Wonderland*," he said, explaining why he had walked over to the pine in the first place.

They moved slowly along the route unfamiliar to his friends. Always before the tunnel was a mere conduit to and from his work-place. Once he'd got to know its features and could have walked it blindfolded, he'd paid no attention to the fine points of his journeys. Now their footsteps behind him made soft impressions of sound in the thin dirt layer covering the rock floor. No one spoke, and every slight rustle of clothing was magnified in the perfect silence. Aurelio coughed once, perhaps from the dryness of the air, and the echo flew around the narrow confines like a trapped bird.

Sand tried not to think of expectations. It was like the opening night of a show, but there was no question of selling anything here. The paintings would never be taken down from the walls. There would be no reviews, no adding to his

reputation, so it was really the closing night as well. But it wasn't about him, after all. Any artist worth his salt could have done this. The choices would have been different, but the results the same. Nonetheless, he had a great deal of affection for what he had chosen. The individual pieces were bound together as volunteers, literally an art underground cut off after today from any support, waiting patiently to surface in a future so distant they might not be recognized on their own terms. It was only natural that he wanted them to have their moment before they vanished into time.

He led Aurelio and Claudia into the centre of the cavern, asking them to keep their flashlights pointed to the floor. Then he went to the spots where he had arranged the portable lights to provide the best possible view of each wall.

"All right," he told them. "Turn off those torches and close your eyes until things are ready." Maybe it was too much, but he'd reached so high with the whole effort that a little drama wouldn't hurt. Or maybe it was that without the drama, and despite what he'd said previously to Aurelio, there was only that familiar feeling of anti-climax whenever he put down his brush at the completion of a work; as if, no matter the Paleolithic absence of the personal, the process of painting, not the finished painting itself, was what mattered. He switched on all the lights one by one. "Okay," he said, and went to watch from the shadows of the tunnel.

They stood together holding hands like children who had been comforting one another in the dark. He loved them more than ever in that moment as they blinked and opened their eyes wide and before any words, no matter how relevant, could engulf such innocence. But words would be what they must inevitably offer to this visual field, and he waited patiently for their arrival. What happened instead took him by complete surprise.

"I'd like to sing something," Claudia said quietly.

Aurelio squeezed her hand and stepped away, but she pulled him back beside her.

It was an aria, but one without lyrics. There was just a sudden melody bursting from her throat and soaring around the room, the bird of reverberation this time brushing the rocks with fluid feathers of sound. As the music entered the space of each painting he could *see* the alternating currents of joy and pain—the dancer raised her heel, the white sleeves billowed around the upraised arms, the stones were pulsing runes in the labourers' hands, the helicopter blades engraved the sky, the horse galloped to a distant rhythm, the hunters shivered in unison beyond the communal fire, and the water swirled beneath the dark figure on the wharf.

The song ended before the currents ceased and Sand knew Aurelio watched with him as the paintings continued to shimmer with this expanded life very much like the magnetic greens, blues, and reds of the northern lights he had seen so long ago above the cabin in the national park. Only those heavenly displays, transient and dependent on the solar winds, were never the same from night to night. The works on these walls, on the other hand, no matter how charged by musical ions, consisted of earthly colours and permanent human strokes. He thought for a moment of leaving a recording of this aria on endless playback loop so potential viewers would hear and see its effect, but he knew such technology would never last like the sealed paintings. Finally there were only the complexities of insight and experience that each viewer brought to each picture. Claudia had sung her response, and Aurelio's reflective mind would lead eventually to his measured say.

"What was that?" he asked her as he emerged from the shadows. "It was incredible."

"It's from Dvorak's *Rusalka* and is one of the most beautiful melodies that I know in opera," she replied. "The title is "Song to the Moon," and there are words to it. A water sprite is asking the moon to protect her princely lover, but when I opened my mouth that story wasn't important. What mattered was something that might pay homage to what's here, and perhaps the melody does that." She shrugged. "A few minutes of song compared to your months of effort, not to mention what all these painters did originally."

"No, my dear," Aurelio said. "You know how long it took you to be able to sing as you do. You called that melody from the depths of who you are. And before you were Dvorak and, I believe, the Czech folk artists who gave him his inspiration. I don't know if such music can live as long as these paintings, but it deserves to. You and your cohorts must find your own cave somewhere."

He turned to Sand. "As for you, my friend, until now I thought you were on a personal quest—necessary to your well-being given the circumstances and your artist's sense of yourself but not something that could be shared. I do want to look at everything close-up, but standing here in the centre of your accomplishment I can tell you this is so much more than a private exhibition. How it will be eventually received I don't know, but, like the aria and its singer, these paintings deserve an eternity of praise." He smiled and pointed toward the Goya. "Is twenty thousand years an eternity? Perhaps not, but barring the notion of God and heaven, which I refuse to surrender, it's the next best thing for this brave Spaniard who refuses as well."

They stayed for several hours studying and discussing the details of each work. The sealer meant they could touch them, and more than once Aurelio swept a hand across a pattern of lines or Claudia left her palm resting on a warm swathe of colour. The doctor went methodically from painting to painting, often standing just

inches from the walls and shining his flashlight as if to find a tiny entrance into meaning or almost microscopic truth he could deliver safely into the world. He would then step back and studiously look from one piece to the other on the same wall, seemingly confident the connections were clear. Occasionally he would ask where Sand thought a figure was gazing or about the mixture of colours that yielded a particular quality of light, or he would bump into Claudia in her looser circuit of the cave and they would speak about the differences between initial and carefully-formed impressions.

She had her own method of wandering from painting to painting or staying in the centre of the floor and spinning slowly as if to take in everything at once. Any connections she made did not depend on immediate proximity, she said, but rather on the way things moved or held their breath to resist the very interpretations she was trying to apply. At first glance, nothing could seem further apart than the defiant man in white facing imminent execution and the two labourers going about their daily tasks. But if you looked closely you could compare the ultimate calm in his gesture with the contained force of their actions. They were partners against chaos and who was to say whose effort was the more effective even with the striking difference in their circumstances? She did spend a long time in front of her Parvati and, at one point, assumed the pose of the goddess, cocking her hip just so with her left arm curved around it and cupping her right hand as if holding the sacred thread. Sand could not see how successfully she captured the facial expression of the goddess, but he knew her operatic training gave her mimic's powers, and he imagined the Parvati's surprise at seeing a mirror image in sneakers and jeans.

Mostly he left his friends alone, sitting just inside the tunnel and thinking of his plans to protect the cave and how directly he fit into them. He could tell them only

so much because they would be shocked by what he was considering and strongly attempt to dissuade him. No, it was better to keep things running smoothly. Although he probably didn't have to do so, he would ask them never to reveal the whereabouts of the cave or anything he'd done inside. They would protest his apparent lack of trust but understand his need for such a promise now they had seen the paintings. He wouldn't put off telling them about the explosion, though. It might be difficult to convince them he could handle the dynamite properly, but they all knew the cave had to be protected from intrusion. Like Font-de-Gaume it would have to be discovered by chance and probably a geological shift that one day exposed the entrance he planned to seal with tons of rubble. Better to get them onside when they were still directly involved with the paintings and the cave. For now he announced he'd be back shortly and walked out into the fresh air and down to the car for the sandwiches, bottle of wine, and three glasses he'd brought in a cooler bag from home.

As he made his way back up the trail, looking at the cloud-filled sky and the spring growth around him, he thought about the fact that all the scenes and figures he had chosen to paint were set outside. Even the Parvati, whatever the confines that contained her as a statue, danced in the wide open spaces between heaven and earth. If he could have painted all the works on those spaces he would have. But alternatively the cave walls promised to be the most durable canvas between the here and now and whatever was to come. Yes, the walls would have to do.

At the clink of the glasses they turned expectantly.

"I was going to ask if there was a decent café nearby," Aurelio said.

"Yes, I'm famished," Claudia added. "The appetite for art must be related to more usual hungers. Whenever I get home after a performance I raid the fridge."

Her stifled giggle erupted into a peal of laughter. “And when I was younger, of course, there were other satisfactions to be met. All that stage passion had to find an outlet, you know.” She pointed to the nude mirror woman in the Rauschenberg. “She knows what I mean.”

Aurelio gave a small cough and put his fist up to his mouth, but the smile behind his knuckles was visible.

“Well, there’s no fridge, but I can provide food and drink,” Sand said. “It’s an excellent red, and the sandwiches I made myself.”

When their glasses were full, Aurelio proposed a toast. “To the first and last artists whoever they may be. And to the three of us who are what we are. Thank you, Ben, for bringing us together in this way.”

They drank, ate, and drank some more. He knew he would see the paintings again, but it was the only time he would be here with his friends. It was good to let his work rest while he enjoyed this interlude. For a little while it was as if there were no illness or death looming over the situation, only good company and the taste of fine Burgundy on his tongue. In the end, Aurelio raised the topic before he did.

“Tell us how you’ll protect the cave, Ben.”

“You mean make sure no graffiti artists find it in the next few years?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“But who could ever find it up here,” Claudia exclaimed. “It’s the middle of nowhere, and even when you’re right beside that tree you can’t see the entrance.”

“But Ben found it, didn’t he? Someone else could tumble down the rabbit-hole.”

“Who owns the land? Couldn’t you buy it up and protect things that way?” she asked.

"It's government territory, but even if I could buy it who knows how the concept of private property will hold up twenty thousand years from now. No, I have to have something more permanent than a bill of sale."

"What then?"

"I'm going to seal off the tunnel."

"How?"

"The only way he can. An explosion." Aurelio scooped up a handful of dirt and flung it upward in an umbrella of fragments. When Sand raised his eyebrows, he smiled conspiratorially. "Yes, the contractor checked up on your reference. I told him you were a munitions expert. He had his doubts, of course, but I assured him in was all in the name of art."

"What are you two talking about?"

"Just the means to an end, my dear. Ben's going to plant a stick of dynamite in the tunnel and bring down a lot of earth between the paintings and any premature intruders."

"That's bloody dangerous!"

"Oh, he'll detonate it from the required distance. Isn't that right?"

He looked at the doctor who seemed to know more than he was saying. "Yes, the contractor gave me a plunger box and lots of cable. It's perfectly safe."

"I don't like it, Ben. Not at all. What if something goes wrong?"

"The only thing that could go wrong, Claudia, is that too much earth comes down. I don't want to touch the cavern itself."

"How will you know if it's worked?"

He didn't answer directly because he couldn't tell her where he would be with the plunger. So he said simply, "Trust me. I'm doing what I have to do."

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"You are planning to come back?" Aurelio was standing in the middle of the living room, hands in his jacket pockets, having, to Sand's surprise, refused a cup of coffee. His question was really a statement, and he wasn't waiting for agreement so much as an admission.

He had chosen to see them separately because he feared their combined objections would sway him from his purpose. "If I don't, I think you'll understand."

"Perhaps I will, but I'm not going to give you my approval. First of all, whatever I've retained of my boyhood faith prevents that. Secondly, I'm a selfish fellow and would like your company as long as possible. There are still numerous things to talk about."

Sand poured himself a cup from the full carafe. "I don't expect there are many who would approve. In fact, I'm not sure I do myself. It's just that in a small way I'd like to be part of the rediscovery of the cave. I can't sign the paintings, but my bones can be a kind of private signature." He laughed. "Or my atoms. I might blow myself into those proverbial smithereens."

"At least your atoms would be anonymous." The doctor inhaled the Columbian aroma. "I think I will have that coffee now."

"Sure they would, but so would my bones."

"Only partly, Ben. The ones finding the place would naturally assume your remains were those of the artist who had died with his work in a cave-in. There's a good chance the paintings themselves would become secondary."

"That won't happen. They'll be marvellously intact and I'll be in much less interesting pieces."

"Maybe. But those pieces will be subject to DNA testing and scientific study. The bones will be dated relative to the works on the wall. That's when the speculations will begin. 'Who were you?' they'd ask. 'Why did you do what you did?' By then, perhaps, no one will have heard of Breughel or Goya so your identity will be more important than theirs. No, I think you should leave things as they are as it is without any personal evidence lying around."

Sand looked out the window at the open spaces of the valley spreading south to the mountains. As far as he knew no human bones had been found in Font-de-Gaume or any other of the famous sites in France and Spain. Like Elvis, he thought, the artists had left the building leaving not even a sweaty scarf behind. Maybe they just stepped outside to die or deliberately walked far enough away to leave no personal trace of connection. He shook his head as if to dispel such self-effacement. The masterpiece truly unsigned.

"I hadn't thought about all this," he said. "I just wanted to be close to my final work and avoid that hoary old cliché of dying in bed surrounded by friends." He grimaced. "Sorry, forget the cliché part."

"You avoid one old chestnut in order to embrace the equally ancient one of dying with your boots on. Very North American, if I may say. But I'm curious. Are you planning to go up with the dynamite or starve slowly as the hunters refuse to share their game?"

"You're relentless, aren't you? The answer is neither. I was thinking of a bottle of aspirin washed down by some of that Burgundy."

"You can do that with Claudia and me at home beside you. Think about that tiny house-light shining in your painting of the vortex. The cave is very dark and lonely by comparison. Those paintings are not for you or me anymore. They're for another age. Let them go."

"Okay, let's say I agree with you for the moment, but even if we take me out of the equation, there's still the matter of sealing the cave. I really don't want some accidental discovery next week or next year. If I let the paintings go I need some guarantee of their longevity. Goya and Courbet deserve that, don't they?"

"They do, and I think the only way to have that assurance is to use the dynamite. Make your explosion, Ben, then come back to us."

He wavered, not entirely convinced by the argument of his Catholic but always catholic friend. And what of Claudia? She might pull on his emotions before his reason, but with *Rusalka* on her side the heart was no negligible force.

They were making their way along the narrow escarpment east of the town, looking down across the rolling countryside and rivers to the foothills of the mountains. The path was stony and uneven and often wandered dangerously close to the precipice. In the far distance the tips of the Pyrenees appeared no higher than where they were walking. Sand imagined a climber gazing back at them from one of the icy pinnacles, puzzled by the heights of an unnamed northern ridge.

"There's so much past out there," she said. "I wonder when people who lived in it started to think about themselves in the future?" When he didn't reply right away, she went on. "I guess what I really mean is when did they start to imagine a future without themselves in it?"

"It's an interesting question," he replied, "but where does it come from?" He and Aurelio had talked about individual painters letting their art go into posterity, and it was an issue he hadn't completely resolved even now, whatever his plans for himself and the cave. Perhaps such an exchange with Claudia would help him and ease what he had to tell her.

“I don’t really know, Ben. Except I have to imagine a future without you, or with only memories of you.” She stooped and picked up a red and black stone, tossing it over the edge where it fell soundlessly through the uncoloured air. “Listen, it goes on forever.”

She sat down on a low, flat-topped boulder and he settled beside her.

“The cave-painters lived such brief lives, didn’t they?”

“Yes, probably less than thirty years for the most part.”

“Maybe that’s why Font-de-Gaume is so intense. They had to say a lot, or paint it, in such a short time.”

“Now you’re getting around to where Aurelio and I have been. Whether their present was all they had or whether they wanted to leave a mark.”

The leap she took surprised him so much he almost reached out as if to stop her from disappearing over the edge of the cliff. “That’s what you’ve pretty much decided to do at the end, isn’t it? Leave a unique kind of mark?”

“How did...?”

“Aurelio and I do talk sometimes when you’re not around.”

“Good practice for what’s to come,” he said, and saw the admonishment in her eyes.

“Okay, I’m sorry.” They sat silently as a stippled hawk soared on up-drafts peeling from the rock face, its wingtips etched against the cobalt expanse of sky.

“What have you decided between you?” he asked eventually.

“Aurelio has his own opinion, but you and I spoke about this past summer,” she said. “It’s your way of going out with the brush in your hand. If I’m honest with you I have to admit part of me would like to be holding your other hand, but that wouldn’t leave the individual artist much room, would it?”

A flock of smaller birds whirled out of the chasm in a burst of colour, hurled together then dispersed by the same violent currents that kept the lone bird apparently unruffled above them. They should collide and drop like the stone, he thought, but they don't. They're just as strong and constant as the hawk.

"So you do understand?"

"Remember I once suggested back then that if I had my dying way I'd be singing an aria at the Met, surrounded by the music. There'd be no creature comforts or Hallmark sentiments of family and friends, just the closing act of a creative life."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, knowing your possible plans, I'm not so sure any more."

"Aren't they just like that final Met performance?"

"Yes, Ben, because you'll stay on stage until the end. But like the ghosts of composers and musicians around me, those cave images will be up there with you. You'll be a small part of them when they're found and celebrated, one more member of the cast."

Sand heard the inclusiveness in her words and, in the ensuing silence, weighed it against his own gesture to come. For some reason Courbet's workers came to mind. That's what he'd been all along, hadn't he—a breaker of the mould, nothing more or less? So where did that really leave him in the end?

"There's another thing," she said. "I don't think you've finished."

He gave a start at this perception. "What do you mean?"

"I don't really know, but I told Aurelio that when you've gone there will be something missing in the cave and for us, as well, on the outside. I mean more of you than is in your paintings so far or in ordinary human remains."

All the birds were invisible now, including the hawk, but the sky for him was rippling like a northern lake all the way to the horizon, just another painting in time.

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Pushing the thin strand of wire into the blasting cap, he connects it to the cable joining the dynamo box and plunger at the entrance then follows the beam of his torch down the rest of the tunnel and into the gallery. Over at the foot of one wall are the brushes, paints, and battery lantern he'd placed there earlier. In the small space left beside the Goya he blends the personal with the anonymous beyond bones or other signatures, drawing the outlines with a red crayon stub and working for hours with the greens and yellows until the turtle and electric bolt emerge in luminous Algonquin light. He will tell his friends this story before he dies.

The girl abandons the shroud of leaves and branches and swims to shore. Walking toward the sun until it disappears into the far red edge of the earth, she turns into the hills. For two nights and days she climbs higher and higher, stopping only to drink from quick cold streams. On the third day she stands on the crest of a steep ridge and sees a small entrance in the rock below. The other cave will never be far away. She will make the same fire. Already the paint is wet in her hands.