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A ROSE IN THE ROAD

SHE STOOD LOOKING at a life-size cast-iron welded statue called "The Little King". From immediately before it, where she was standing, it resembled nothing so much as the metallic fossiliferous remains of some primeval fern. But from my position at the end of the room, the silhouette of the little king stood out bold and clear against the wall, conveying in simple lines and strong shapes the artist's intentions. So did hers.

All art aspires to the condition of drama, rather than music as Pater held, and a piece of sculpture or a painting can never be seen once for ever but must always be taken in its particular dramatic context. Now, as she stood before it, "The Little King" took on a far greater significance for me. It grew larger, overshadowing the other pieces and paintings in the gallery. She mirrored it, as "The Little Queen". I was staring at them both as dramatic components of an *objet d'art*.

She raised one eyebrow suddenly, at once communicating with me and signifying her awareness of my pregnant presence. She moved away, looking closely at a painting on the wall behind. My eyes followed her, recognizing her as the central figure of the piece.

She turned a corner. It was late, and the gallery was otherwise empty, except for the guard who stood, as immobile as the sculpture, two rooms away, practising an absent stare. I walked down the empty room, just far enough so that she was again within my scope of vision. My resounding steps were slow enough to seem disconnected, fast enough to manifest purpose. I turned and stood very still, as if studying a painting, but my eyes were fixed on her.

She defended herself by examining closely one painting after another, smiling, wrinkling her brow, raising one eyebrow, then the other, then both at once, stepping back, walking more quietly than I had, aware that by every movement she was speaking, inviting, daring, forbidding. She moved into the next room. This time I walked only six steps, standing by a nude torso, staring across the gallery's silence.

She continued to move quietly about, at last retreating to the final room of the series.

I took ten measured steps to put myself in view of all the last large room. She had walked to the corner immediately inside the door and now turned around to look back at me for the first time. My pensive, brooding stare was not altered. She smiled uncertainly. I continued to stare. Her eyes passed to a large abstract on the wall beside her, as if they had met mine *en passant*. The guard, who had been standing at the far end of the room, glided serenely past and out.

She moved from the corner to a large modern interpretation of a Mayan Sun-God's totem. Although I could see the entire room from my position, I walked three steps to maintain our proximity—to sustain the psychic distance, I reminded myself. She smiled quietly, inwardly, and slowly removed her light raincoat, which until then had hung loosely on her shoulders. She also pulled a printed fabric scarf from her neck and fluffed her dark burnished hair with the arched gleam of her tapered fingernails. I breathed very deeply, audibly exhaling toward her. My tongue touched my upper lip.

She walked to the far corner of the room, glaring at a study in black and white. I walked as before until within a yard of her; between us was a two-inch bar of steel tortured into shapes and spaces evoking its tension. One process of the bar curved by me toward her breast, heaving quickly now with her coat off. For the first time I raised my arm and ran my index finger along the rough edge of the iron bar, beneath which a neatly typed card labelled it "Boundaries". I left my finger at the edge of the bar.

She turned to face me, again smiling uncertainly. My eyes softened their glare, and too smiled very slightly. She spoke almost in a whisper.

"I have the feeling that I am on exhibition too", she said.

"I suppose it is a chance one takes by coming to a gallery", I answered softly. We continued to stare at each other across "Boundaries". After a while we began to talk about surrealism.

We had come out to the lobby between acts. I told her that I was afraid of second times. Once it is accomplished, the first time is a pearl, a crystal globe, a sphere perfect in its own terms. To meet, to speak a second time is at least to set this globe aside and to begin again, or at most to shatter it and commence a new, more complex construction.

I showed her the poem, explaining that a necessary concomitant of meeting

me was partial entombment in a poem, like a fly stuck in amber. It was not a very good poem, not sufficiently self-explanatory for general reading, "extracting" its justification precisely in the dental sense of the term from the particular situation.

PEARLDIVER LOST OVERBOARD

deep in gallery's storied paintsea,
 currentless,
 unfathom'd,
 still beside derelict sculpture,
 sudden yet silently waving glides
 fabled mermaiden
 not native to shallower shores,
 but depthloving, clinging to sounds,
 sands unstirred by sharp surface wave.

now dark on ocean floor eyes gemglow low—
 she sings!—

and sea organswells with her pulsing heart rhythm,
 saltsand stirs fountainous dust showers high,
 and drowned in her lifethrobbing choral lovewave,
 I am lost to horizontal ships sadly searching,
 I sink soft to her as she sings.

She read it several times, then turned to face me, folding the paper away into her purse. She was smiling again, but now I knew it to be no uncertain smile; it was full of that remote certainty rooted in the peace that passeth disturbing intercourse with others. Her eyes shone with the glow of her polished, incredibly long and arching fingernails, beautiful, hard, armed with sharp points. She said, "I have difficulty finding myself in the poem."

I considered then augmenting her comprehension by giving her the alternative interpretation, the one that I had mailed to my wife in the hospital, in which "the mermaiden was femininity personified with particular reference physically to herself but spiritually to my wife. This woman thus became woman incarnate." I phrased it to myself in just these words, softening the personal references with abstract terminology. I was staring at her as I had in the gallery and was about to speak. Now she looked back at me, smiling slightly, raising one eyebrow. I saw the polished glint of her eyes. The theatre lights dimmed. I said that we'd better be getting back to our seats.

I was staring at her across our two glasses in the Polynesian Lounge. I told her she was lovely. She used the music to look away thoughtfully for a moment, her left eyebrow once again cocked in disinterested consideration. I knew that in a moment she would turn quickly to me, her face exploding in vibrant animation as she talked. Her face was a fist, bound up with tension and strength, ending in polished, tapering nails, only opening in violence when she had something to say. So it had been with her first words to me, and so it was now.

"I think you put too much emphasis on externals", she said.

I made a distinction. "Had I said you were beautiful, you'd be quite right. By 'beautiful' I refer to this sort of external appearance. But to say that you are lovely is something else again. A 'lovely' woman is one who shows by this external appearance a most significant inwardness, namely a potential, a willingness, to communicate with me. She manifests enough honesty about herself to be capable of the sincerity needed for significant communion. You are lovely."

I saw the red polish of her nails patterning rust puddles against the amber of her Scotch, and looked at her face. That slight certain steel smile was in her pupils adding force to the violence of the fist. "But," she said, "I don't want to communicate with you."

We had already discussed the Mozart recording which was playing again now. I acknowledged the technical brilliance of her favourite composer but found that he had much less to say to me than a Schumann or a Beethoven. I had called him "Tennysonian", facile of expression but lacking in a sincere personal message. She disagreed.

I was delineating to myself the black border etched on the present scene by her announcement of her imminent departure for Europe coupled with my private knowledge of my wife's recovery and impending arrival in the city. She brought two glasses of Scotch from the kitchen and sat beside me, smiling slightly, attentive to the music. My fingertips felt the contours of her face as had my eyes in the gallery. When the recording ended she rose and crossed to the player.

"You will kill a man very easily if you decide upon it. You have the means at your instant disposal." I said it to her back.

She turned, the record between her nails, one eyebrow raised in what might have been taken for surprise, if her eyes had not retained that vibrant distant sheen. The fist jabbed sharply. "How?"

"Some day someone will be depending on you, expecting from you, staking his very existence on your taking some action, making some response, fulfilling some vital need in a crucial situation. And you will smile that quiet smile, and your eyes will be just as they are now. Someone will leap to you and you will let him fall just beyond the reach of your shimmering nails. Not from any sadism, not even from uncaring indifference, but for reasons which I cannot understand or articulate, but which I see and feel and dread when I look at you or speak to you or touch you—the dread which is a terrible fear but also an insistent longing."

The Mozart recording began for the third time. She sat beside me again. To sing in the wind of the storm, to open your lips to the face of violence, perhaps to pardon your persecutor as he nails you to the cross, this is to kiss a fist.

Much later, she raised her head above mine and shook her dark curls, the shine of which, I had discovered, was identical with that of her nails, that of her eyes. I clutched at her back, raising myself toward her, but she spoke before I could reach her, a muffled explosion in lyrical tones. "What an intense young man!" she said.

"Portrait of the artist as an intense young man!" I laughed back loudly. But her eyes were the same, and the laugh had been sharp, cutting away its own comic mask. I suddenly felt very tired. "I was wrong about your killing a man", I said. "Wrong in my tense. I said you will kill one in that way. But you already have. And you are."

I was reflecting on my reasons for not telling her or my absent wife and child. At the very first I had not wanted to sever all means of communication by this information. Now I felt that since this was the last time she was to see me, there was no need for a more complete biography than was adequate for our purposes. This justified my silence to her. But for myself—what was her significance for my marriage, for my family soon to be reunited? Perhaps she is a wife-image, I mused, twisting Freud. Certainly she was no less than that. And certainly she was more. I rang the doorbell.

The thorns had been too thick for her, so I had picked the rose. It was the red of her lipstick and nail polish and, pinned above her breast, it glowed not unlike them in the moonlight. Now it shone bravely, wilted and battered by the evening's exertion.

I was telling her how she had contributed to my aesthetic education, in that I now understood Mozart, or at least understood why I had not fully appreciated him before. This had occurred when I articulated the experience of the previous evening, that identification of herself and Mozart, that analogizing of my problems with both of them. It was only when I abandoned my persuasion that all composers, all women, should speak to me with the immediacy of a Schumann, of my wife, that I could appreciate Mozart's more technically polished, more formalized expression, and appreciate the more iridescent, more unapproachable femininity of her smile. Mozart's music was no more empty technical skill than was the brushed sheen of her black hair or the glimmering surface of a forest pool at midnight.

I was telling her as much of this as I could when I was suddenly seized with an awareness of the importance of that moment, there beneath the moon on the dusty sideroad close to her suburban apartment, then while the need for expression was so great, and its means so near to hands and lips, so far from words. I stopped talking.

Later, as we left the place, continuing along the road, she noticed that the rose had fallen from her breast. I looked back instinctively. It was shining there red by the moonlight, lying where we had stood. The dust of our footsteps had begun to settle on it. She kept walking, and said quietly, "Don't look back." I followed her up the road.