

NATALYA MINCHIN

AN AUTUMN MADNESS

I MET HIM ON THE SIDEWALK, a dissociated presence in a great stillness of body sitting in the midst of his worldly possessions. I mean his paintings. They were all around him, tightly huddled together, enfolding him inside the embrace of a world he had created especially for them.

And a cold embrace it was. A cold world.

Urban swamscapes of stones rising stiff like plumbines from the macadamized earth. The grey tint of a chill September drizzles on the deserted pavement. The streetlights brood mist-choked. Together with their creator, the canvasses have aged ungracefully. They have never been bestsellers.

Art's offspring. Haunters of Poverty's alleys. Members of the hand-to-mouth society.

Behind him, hoardings had been erected around a condemned building. It looked as if he had been thrown out with the garbage and the sidewalk was as far as he had gotten. He had a sign up on an easel: *The Artist Is In*. But his whole attitude was negative. The river of the big city streamed by him but he didn't stretch out his hands to it. He didn't whimper and he didn't beg. He didn't beat his chest. I couldn't read what it was he kept hidden in his eyes. He wore a vacancy. No bitterness, mind you, no hostility, just a sterile silence. I was sure that underneath that impersonal mask all kinds of screams lay bunched. I was sure of it. But his face remained *tabula rasa*, a complete blank. Like his immobility.

He could have warmed his day on the cold stones by trying to sell some of his paintings, spared himself the tedium of just sitting. A little salesmanship often goes a long way, even a short way, to let in a beam of city sunlight, or a ray of the moon, however drab, however witless. He was an artist (like myself, incidentally), and a few sales would have lifted his spirits. At least you would think so. Isn't that what Art is all about? Selling the stuff? But he did none of the above, perhaps to spare himself needless fatigue by stirring from the stones, or the needless pain of a rejection one more time repeated. Perhaps he had grown tired asking the world to come down to him with a

penny of its goodwill. He preferred to ignore and be ignored, huddled and withdrawn, cast immobile in his private niche amidst its ruinstrewn stones. He just sat, in contemplation of his abdomen, or with his head bowed to the colourless shattering pavement beneath his bare feet. He didn't even wiggle his toes. Maybe he didn't have the energy. To wiggle his toes. To start a sales campaign. To sow the seeds of Art, please with the aesthetic form. A pity, for his paintings weren't bad. I confess I was much taken by them, such as they were, in spite of their brooding. Even the despair of life can be rendered artistically. Art has that power, that special humanity that will speak so tragically through its eyes. *My God. My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?*

Yes, the paintings were much superior to the kind you buy at department stores. They should have been hanging in some gallery. The man had a talent hard to find these days, especially on sidewalks.

"I like that one," I said.

I was referring to the large painting, several times the size of the others, the face and bust of a young woman. Feathers of the black raven framing the pallor of Antarctic ice. Her eyes inscrutable upon the crepuscular dawn, unflinching. I stood gazing upon a face of utter immobility, so perfect in its speechlessness, so seamless. You couldn't imagine what she was looking at, what she was thinking behind that alabaster distance. Yet, I sensed a grip of alarm in those far-away eyes. A momentous moment fused in paints, an imperious experience, a fortune, a destiny? Perhaps she is waiting? Perhaps fleeing? Or is it the Artist himself who is waiting, fleeing? What mysteries lay concealed, yet expressed, in that pale glance of silence?

A mystery? Yes, I could recognize it, for I had lived long and hard enough to know.

What else but Love?

I happen to know a thing or two about Love. I am the voice that tells of the madness of pursuit, the struggle to escape, the wild, wild ecstasies. I am a writer even though I am a waitress seven days a week from dawn to dusk and often overtime to boot.

"You're very gifted."

I was hoping to draw him out of his silence, lift him out of the urban swamp of his horizontal vision. Was I not his sister? His naked eyes just gave me an aimless glance. He looked at me without much interest. Certainly no enthusiasm. I figured him looking like that at the sight of a yellow sunrise, an orange-sliced sunset, the waxing and waning of just another day repeating.

"I am a writer," I said. "I am not without aesthetic sensitivity. I know

true art when I see it.”

At last he recognized me as one related to him.

“I need ten dollars to buy bread,” he said.

“That’s a lot of bread for an artist,” I said.

“A few crumbs,” he said, “considering I just offered you a fortune in beauty.”

He was right of course. Where these days do you buy beauty for ten dollars? And no doubt about it; that painting was beautiful. He deserved the food, and my curiosity a story. I decided to take him to the little eatery across the street. I would use my Artist Union card and claim a discount.

“What about all your paintings?”

“Leave them. They’re safe. Nobody ever bothers to take one.”

He was right. No ravenous eyes from admirers. People rushed by unseeing, their steps a hurried passage to life’s relief into the porcelain bowl.

His paintings were safe.

No inheritors of immortality, they would continue to mildew into old age. Their urges spent, they would go on leaning disassociated against hoardings.

Random expressions of senseless beauty.

Time erodes utopian dreams upon the inevitable divorce of what has been, what is, and what will never be.

“But this one I’ll take with me,” he said.

He grabbed the large painting and carried it into the pizzeria, with some difficulty, as the winds along the street caught hold of it like a sail and tried to tear it from his hands. But he held on tight like it was a precious treasure. He settled it on the chair beside him. Then both he and the woman on the canvas sat staring out into life’s commonplace, the two of them shackled in that bond that binds Art’s creator to Art’s creation, silent but with their silences hammered deep inside the region of the heart (or the soul, if you happen to be a believer in souls). I could sense the heat smouldering naked on the table. I picked up his artist’s vibes, so to speak, the psychic waves of a metamorphosis restoring him to the fierce intensity of a moment of the past, distant yet still connected.

“Tell me about her while you’re eating your pizza,” I said. “I’d like to know.”

It was late in life that he decided to take up painting seriously. He had turned forty, too old for such silliness. At that age, summer days start to fade upon a longer twilight. Lethargy seeps into the limbs and bones. Memories

become edged with a touch of autumn sadness. People treated this nonsense with open sarcasm, especially his bank manager who claimed he knew all about art. A dangerous ambition. But it was a wonderful feeling nonetheless, this urge to abandon life's predictable commonplaces and to reach out to an unknown destiny, not so drab, certainly harder, likely sadder. The risk exhilarated him. He would gather all his old spring-time hopes and start his days anew. He would beat the odds.

They thought that his oddity would pass. When it didn't they thought him crazy. But he really was quite sane.

Painting was not new to him. Already as a child he had confounded those around him with his love for crayons and watercolours to the neglect of guns and martial arts. By the time he was three, he was stalking the walls of the world in pursuit of canvases. He grew up with painting on the brain, but his parents, small-town rural folk, were not given to encouraging him along those lines. His father ran a hardware store. He made a marginal living and had no ambition to knock at clouds. His son was expected to follow in his footsteps, as sons are supposed to do unless they can do better. But Art is no improvement on the business of hardware. Nuts and bolts and garden hoses fell to him as his natural heritage. Spurned by all in his aspirations, he was forced to feed off his own encouragement. To be an Artist! The mere idea of it was an insidious agony draining his strength. I shall surely die here in this town as a hardware merchant, he thought. And he came to despair of his destiny as a painter. Some days, so he told me, shivering with the memory of it, he really felt like dying.

I nodded my head. I am a writer. I know the feeling.

But it was his parents who died. First his dear mother. His father grew gloomy and withdrawn after that. Never had he paid attention to painting, but now he lost interest even in hardware, and hardware had been the motivation of his life. Suddenly, without warning, he too went. He had been dying inside all that time, a little more each passing day, without telling anybody. In the end, death burst through the despair of his loneliness and he left, quietly, without a fuss. It was easier for him to die of loneliness than of old age.

"I shall be joining you soon." How often had he not spoken those words to his wife in heaven? This time he had meant it.

The death of his genitors freed the son from hardware bondage. He sold the business and found himself master of his destiny. He was forty years old and he would be a painter.

He spent that first autumn of his late but hopeful pilgrimage in the big

city as a student at the College of Art.

And it was there that he met Anastasia.

She was one of the school's regular models, a young woman, very exotic, a Russian émigré from St. Petersburg. He became excited by her detached distant face, by her strong, sleek body with its firm-rising breasts. Her melancholy reminded him of the city's sunsets with their afterglow of palefire gloom. There were lines of poetry written around that absent, naked figure poised motionless in front of the students. A Venus of Melos with eyes the colour of coal, with the same chill marbled skin, a figure of total femininity bewitching even without the deformities. He drew her nakedness with an indecent, almost obscene joy, immersing his sensations into the riches of her flesh like into warm water, fashioning dreams as he lay in the swaying waves of her form so splendid in its convexities and concavities. He drew her with an expertise he didn't know he possessed. And he began to dream of her as the ideal woman in whose mystery blended all his romantic feelings of unfulfilled, middle-aged, rural-town yearning. She became the very soul of his art. He wished so fervently to talk to her, ask her about life, speak to her of love, but that far-distant look never allowed proximity. She would walk in, take her place unsmiling, say nothing, never raise those coal-dark eyes of hers, cough now and then, and, in the end, leave. One evening she wasn't there and they went on to male figures, but he kept dreaming of that lithe body and of the lustre on the young, elegant face with its faraway stare. How crazy he became because of her. How he ground his teeth in frustration and wandered about aimlessly at night when lonely lovers stalk ghosts and howl up to the moon. With all his expectant senses trembling and wide-open he looked for her face in every face that passed, looked into all the eyes that glanced in his direction. In vain. In vain.

She had disappeared but, God, how she had branded her image forever into his poor heart! How she kept her blaze burning inside of him!

One night as he was sauntering about, he entered a small eatery that advertised vegetarian pizza dishes. The waitress who served him was Anastasia. The recognition left her indifferent.

"We have this and this and that," she said in a dry professional tone without relish. "And the house wine is *Chianti Classico*."

She was wearing a black outfit with a white apron (just like mine, incidentally). Her face was white like her apron, and he thought he had never seen skin so beautifully whitechalky. He couldn't get enough of it. She was like a mutation in the midst of a crowd smothered in ruinous clouds of carbon dioxide and nicotine, a face of cloudless purity. He couldn't drag him-

self away. He had admired her stonecut nakedness. He had recreated and loved her sinfully with a nocturnal narcissistic lust. Now, seeing her again, he experienced an unbearable desire to possess her live flesh and blood and emotions. Trembling all over he went home. With his class sketches and drawings as models, he painted her in oil, in the style of Meissonier, drawing her out of darkness like the luminous vision that she was. A splendid picture. Never had he painted one more inspired. Hopelessly in love with Anastasia he returned to the restaurant on the evenings he wasn't sketching at the college, until his presence became like a shadow and forced itself upon her and she could not ignore it any longer.

"Is the food here that good?" she said.

"I come not for the food," he said. "I come here to see you."

"You have seen much more of me at the art class."

"I'm tired of thinking of you as a geometry of lines and planes and angles," he said. "I want to fill Galatea with Pygmalion's living breath, embrace your soul with my soul." He felt no embarrassment talking that sort of twaddle. He was in love.

"You sound like a poor poet," she said.

"Poor as a poet but rich as a painter," he said. "Come with me to my studio. I want you to see how I've created you. Then I want you to pose for me."

"I don't sit privately for amateurs."

"I'm not an amateur. I'm a painter."

There was a sharp September chill in the air that night. He took her straight up to his loft, hurriedly, uncontained, with his greed already fawning upon her. She ignored him.

"Show me the painting," she said, standing in the middle of the floor, with her hands pushed deep inside the pockets of her long, black overcoat, in that same sulking, bored pose she had worn for the art class.

He uncovered the painting on its easel and stepped back. For the longest time she remained motionless, staring at her luminous self without expression. The moon through the skylight softened the white figure on the canvas with a haze that made it faintly aquiver.

"Kiss me," she said finally, after a long and stubborn silence. She kept her eyes glued to the painting.

He told me how an indescribable happiness filled him then, like one of those great effulgent sunbursts on the marbled mountains of which the poet Pindar sang. It was like the greatest happiness on earth, he said, to be so anointed by the saliva from those lips, to have the cold grey northern

skies of one's own being open up in crisp clear vistas of endless possibilities, suddenly, without warning and against all expectations. And yet, and yet, at the same time he trembled upon her kiss and was full of fear at its touch. He was afraid. Like all desperate lovers he possessed a sense of impending disaster. In those few seconds of uncontrolled ecstasy he became horrified by the thought of losing her. He hadn't possessed her yet and already he felt abandoned.

She stood beneath the skylight and took off her clothes, unbidden, offering freely the whole length of her elegant body he had so long admired. Wordlessly she offered those eyes of hers, those full lips, those rising breasts, the fuzzy nakedness of her abdomen with its splendid dark shadow. He kissed her and her heart stirred and her eyes closed blind and turned inward like those of a madwoman. Her lips opened wide. He made love to her on the frayed Persian carpet on the wooden floorboards, before the portrait with its melancholy eyes looking down on their intertwined nakedness. How could he ever forget the terrible magic of that night?

She had a passion like boiling pitch but in the morning she was cool and distant once again.

"Let me go," she said, defending herself against his new heat. "I have things to do."

"Will you come back to me this evening?"

"Please let me go."

"I'll meet you at the restaurant."

"Don't come. You won't find me. It's my night off."

"We met only moments ago," he said. "Stay a little longer. You are so beautiful."

"I cannot stay. I have promises to keep."

He didn't understand the meaning of her words, but he understood that insisting was pointless. "Promise me then that you will come back to me this evening."

"Until this evening." She spoke dispassionately. She walked out onto the gloomy landing and then, already on the way down, turned to him one last time. "You did a fine painting of me," she said.

He waited all day for her that Saturday in a disastrous loneliness. Those were savage hours that moved so slow and threw such torturing, slow-lengthening shadows. How does one live through the torment of a lover's unresolved expectancy? He told me he never managed it. He kept waiting. By the time the moon stood high, he knew she would not return, not that evening, not the evening after, not ever. And he asked himself: Is it God's

punishment of me for my sin of fornication? Does He think that the love I bear her is but a passion of the flesh? Or had she been one of the Devil's cruel pranks? He rushed to the little eatery like a man poisoned inside and looking for an antidote. Expecting what? Had she not told him she would not be there? The antidote was simply more poison.

"Nastasia is not around," one of the other waitresses told him, hurriedly, for the place was thick with bodies. "She won't be back for a few days. Her husband arrived from Russia with their little child. They finally got straightened out with Immigration. She went to the airport this evening to meet them."

Her husband and her little child! He kept repeating those words like an echo for a long time after, like a babbling idiot who has lost his mind.

He told me he would have killed himself that night had it not been for the woman who stared at him from the canvas in the loft. Before the reflective sadness of her eyes he sat all night, drinking the wine and the champagne bought for the two of them, howling his torment and despair silently to the moon like a dying dog baying only for the moment of extinction. But how to bid farewell to such beauty? He decided he could not. Had he not created her out of his dreams, invoking the wide grace of the gods to make her perfect with his artistry? Had not his artist's hand outpaced the vision of the eye and tragically rendered the impossible distance on that melancholy face? He had painted her driven by Love's awesome force, opening his soul to the horror of the hopeless fatalism that accompanies the eternally tempting and elusive woman. Forever would he live with her, spectral and yet so real, so persevering, feeding and rejuvenating his despair out of long ago extinguished life.

And though he died that night he did not kill himself. He became a painter.

He had stopped talking. The strain was telling on him. He avoided the eyes beside him, not wishing to relive in their far-off melancholy that miraculous and disastrous moment he had alluded to. I could see how he loved her still, how he was still waiting, retracing his footsteps, Peer Gynt unable to free himself from Solveig's ghost. He would wait forever.

Love will endure beyond the evanescence of Time, even when it does not progress, even when it fails.

Heavy of heart I followed his retreat out of the pizzeria. I sipped my *Chianti Classico*, not trying to hold him back to comfort him, him and his

painting of a gorgeous but consuming flower, him and his creation of her, his soul embracing hers so violently, repudiating all else, all ridicule and doubts, all admonitions and rural notions, all history, all the autumnal chills of a lover's pain, all the tears, all the tears.

Abandon despair, poor mortal man of brushes and of paints, and leave behind the delusions of a time when you were no longer young but not as old as now. Think kindly of the woman you worshipped once too rashly. Love is quick off the mark, but deceitful.

There are times when I think it pays to stay in hardware.