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Where You Most Expect It

“AND YOU’VE BEEN there all this time? Never once came back?”

“Not once.”

“You didn’t miss it?”

“Never.”

She looked hard at the man, trying to see in his timeworn face whether it could possibly be true; if she’d learned anything in her fifteen long years it was that people’s words—‘You look nice!’ or ‘I love you,’—rarely were. “I don’t believe you,” she said.

He smiled, the ratcheting down of a defence shield. But the eyes did not reflect the smile, as though they were not about to fold so easily.

“That’s good. You shouldn’t believe everything you hear. In fact, you probably shouldn’t believe much of it.”

Wondering if he might actually be reading her mind, she feigned annoyance. “Oh, come on Mister!”

“Have you ever really tried comparing a person to a tree?”

“I don’t—”

“Trust me,” he said, turning back to his painting, blotting some of the blue with a paint-stained rag, then adding a cloud to the sky. “We don’t come out well.”

She looked more closely at the colour-stained paper with its rendition of the view south from the Heath. It looked finished, yet somehow incomplete. She looked more closely and realized what it was: clearly visible from where they sat was the corpulent cone of the Swiss Re just west, and the pyramidal cap of Canary Wharf Tower to the east, and in between, the countless flat-tops of meeker architectural feats. But none of that prodded the smoothly billowing blooms of colour in his painting. “You haven’t put in any of the skyline.”

He didn’t respond.

“And you’ve missed the bathing sheds on the lake,” she pressed, “not to mention those blokes swimming.”

He held his brush in his fist, defensive. “Reality’s right in front of your eyes. I paint what I want to see.”

She was beginning to see how deep it ran. Perhaps it was true.

“Have you seen any artist-renditions of Manhattan,” he continued, “when it was New Amsterdam? Before people went and flattened it?”

“What?”

“The whole area was covered in forest before it was all killed. So was England. All of *Europe*. Imagine . . .”

She couldn’t. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to.

“I remember near the flat I had there was this tiny park, really just a small stand of trees with a bench in it, like a deserted island in a cartoon. I had to go home for a month because some drunk driver had killed my brother and my mother was in shock.” Pulling to the surface this memory resulted in no change to his expression—not because he wasn’t affected by the thought, it simply seemed that the sadness was as much a part of the foundation of his face as his cheekbones or temples. “And when I came back, those trees were gone. Turned into a parking lot . . . I can still hear the silence of the birds, the wind-blown leaves.”

She didn’t know about geography and trees, even birds really, nor did she particularly care much about them, but when he spoke she felt like maybe she should, like maybe she actually *did*. “So that was the last straw, yeah?”

“No, that wasn’t it.”

She watched as he held his painting up close to his spectacled face, examining it. He brushed back his silver hair strewn about by the wind, only to have it scattered once again, more completely this time.

“But there was one? A final straw, I mean.”

“Yes.” He held his breath, as though trying to decide whether he should risk turning it into the words. He stared deeply into his painting, then out into the skyline. He spoke without looking at her, as though speaking to London itself. “The homeless are as much a part of cities as the home-full, but you get used to them in a hurry because then you don’t have to think about them.” Now he turned and looked at her. “But there was this one, just refused to be pushed out of your mind. He was towering, about a foot and a half taller than me. His grimy torn trousers were too short, exposing three or four pairs of socks squeezed into fake-leather loafers, which were caked in filth like a dishwasher’s in a restaurant. His beige parka was stained with the cloudy yellow-brown blooms of a million unwashed spills and always

undone, hanging off his shoulders, trying like everyone else to get the hell away from him.”

As though afraid of the image, he turned back to the one he was creating and rinsed off his brush by grinding it firmly into the base of his cup. He tried to resume painting but couldn't seem to choose a colour, as though they'd all been suddenly spoiled. “But the most disturbing thing...”

He turned to her again and the intensity of his gaze chilled her. It was the look of a man undressing her, a look she knew well, but his wasn't sexual and it wasn't superficial—it was as though he was carving her up, tearing her apart to see what she was made of. She felt relief as he looked away. “With his spittle-flecked beard and slick long hair, his sere blue eyes like dry-ice, he looked like Jesus. A cliché, the bum Jesus, but he looked exactly like the one in the painting over the chair my mother used to sit in every night to do her crosswords.”

It was as though he was reading from a book he'd long ago memorized; she wanted to add to it somehow. “We have framed Jesuses all over the place in my house,” she offered. “All of them pastel colours. So ugly. I think my mom thinks her sins will be forgiven if she does them in plain view rather than behind his back.” He seemed to be considering her words. She tried smiling, but he didn't seem to notice. “Are you religious then?”

He just snorted, then chose black and continued reading the story in his head. “He would wander through the rain-soaked Tesco parking lot, as though it were a desert he was lost in, listing left then right, lurching like a dying man looking for open arms to collapse into, asking all and sundry for change... the pecuniary kind of course, he couldn't see farther than that.” He put the brush to the paper at last, darkening the shadows at the base of the trees edging the rise. “I never gave him anything. No way to help such people. Alcohol will never help anything... what can you say of the fact that it's our drug of choice, one that allows us to delude ourselves into thinking and believing that spending time with one another is enjoyable?” He stopped, as though thinking he'd finally said too much—as though, like everyone else, he assumed she couldn't handle the truth of things.

She tried to think of something to say that would make him carry on, but nothing came. As usual. Words had never been her strong suit; nothing had ever been her strong suit. She sat tight, wondering which of his muscles would twitch next, hoping he'd carry on. And then, he did.

“I was trying to get by on a part time job at Woolworth's and painting everything and everywhere but making little and getting nowhere... Watercolour's such an under-rated technique.” He paused again and she wondered what could be written on the page he seemed afraid of arriving at. “It's easy to make something that looks somewhat attractive, anyone

can do it so it's considered plebeian painting. But to really master colour, to make an even tone, to control the wash and contain the image yet allow it to live, that is art."

From what she was seeing she could accept that an art it probably was, but she'd never really been able to understand what all the fuss was about some collared images laid onto paper. Sure, it was neat how some painters could make it look so real, but in the end it was just pictures. "Come on, what about that last straw?"

He smiled, as though her words had flipped at last the switch on the neon sign pointing out the age difference between them. Then, though the arc or depth of it did not change, she saw that the smile had become somehow fake, a welcome mat placed in front of a locked door to make it seem less locked. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Fifteen."

"And have you ever been out of the city? Ever been out camping in the forest? The real forest?"

"You're having me on, surely?" she laughed. "I see my Dad maybe once a week, my mother folds clothes for a living, and my brother's in jail for burning down some abandoned houses in Mile End with his bloody idiot friends. No, no one's ever thought of taking me anywhere."

He nodded his head, as though he'd known what she would say. "Well, I hope you can go someday, before they're all cut down or killed by pests, before the planet goes bald like a chemo patient. Make it a priority because I'll tell you, in the forest everything's in its right place, the clouds are up and the soil's down. Everything's beautiful. Even a rotting rabbit crawling with maggots is beautiful."

She cringed at the image. "That's revolting."

His expression turned to stone and his gaze panned so wide it was impossible to guess what his eyes were seeing. "No, what's revolting is seeing and smelling this homeless man, this Jesus, passed out spread eagle on the side of the pavement, literally a human stain, a trail of wet running across the concrete from his crotch to the edge of the road, a line pissed in the sand and everyone crossing it like it wasn't there, looking away, pretending not to notice, but careful to avoid stepping on it, not wanting to get the soles of their shoes soiled. That line of human waste trailing from that clump of human waste, *that* was the final straw. I froze in my tracks, wondering if it might have been his final dying-piss, if he might be dead ... and do you know what?"

She wasn't sure he expected an answer, but he remained silent so she tried one. "You helped him?"

Again his real smile, so full and transformative, as though rather than spreading himself thin pouring effort into a multitude of different expressions, all his practice had gone into perfecting this one. “No, that’s what *you* would have done, but I did not. I...” he took a deep breath and closed his eyes, “hoped to God he *was* dead.”

He went silent again and she waited, then couldn’t any longer. “Was he?”

The clouds overhead had moved quite a ways across the sky by the time he replied. “I don’t know.” He looked at the dirt at their feet, as though checking a list of who’d been buried there. “I crossed that line with the rest of them and left for Canada the next day. Because in that moment, it drilled into the core of my soul, the diamond point of hatred with three faces—for the human race as a whole for allowing him to come to that; for him for allowing it to happen, for pointing out to me how terrible things truly are; and hatred of myself for thinking such things. I had to get away. I thought I’d gone insane and I feared I might... kill someone. Or myself.”

“I feel that way all the time,” she heard herself say softly. She looked out over the park, then back at him. “And so you went to the bush and lived as a hermit for the last twelve years?” He nodded. “So, why on earth are you here now?”

“I had to come,” he said, almost pleading, “to see if anything’s changed.”

“And?”

He turned away again, the silver strands of his hair again playing with the wind. A few tufts fell into his eyes and he left them there. “Do me a favour,” he said.

“What?”

“Go someday. To the deep forest. Alone. Go.”

“You’re joking! I’d be way too scared.”

“Scared?... There’s nothing frightening there. This,” he said, motioning to the city below them, “is scary. Nature is real and true. There’s nothing to fear there. It’s all here,” he pointed vigorously to his temple, “localized in us. That’s what you need to fear.”

She had to admit, it sounded reasonable enough. It was true, no tree had ever thrown its weight into its knuckles and smashed her jaw, no blade of grass had ever turned away from her in fear of its own prejudice, no animal had ever forced her legs apart and stabbed her repeatedly until she’d bled white. And then laughed.

As he worked on his version of reality she sat silently beside him, enjoying the sun and the soft wind blowing up her short sleeves and holding her sweating torso in its cool embrace. It was so rare for her to be with a

person she could feel comfortable with. Her friends made her feel ridiculous, compelling her into speech and situations that were forced and fake, and the adults in her life were hardly better, making her feel like either an idiot to be spit on or a rag doll to be ripped to shreds. But then, just like that, he was packing up his brushes and paints.

“Finished?” she asked sadly, afraid to part his company.

For with him she felt safe, and balanced, as if he cared what she was, as though he knew who she was. And somehow it allowed her to care and know as well.

“Yep,” he said. “And this is for you.”

He handed her the painting, and she held it in her hands. She saw there was still no skyline, but he’d painted a park-bench in with a girl on it, a black girl, with platted hair and a white t-shirt.

“Is it me?”

“Yes, It’s you,” he said softly. “You go and find your forest. Okay?”

She turned from him and looked out over the city with her eyes nearly closed, turning everything to a blur that hid the dark edges of the skyline. She thought of what to say.