

JACQUELINE KARP-GENDRE

## Sans Paroles

YES, SHE WOULD GO. After all. It was one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions she wasn't going to analyze. She just grabbed hold of it and held tight.

She edged her way round the Place de la Concorde, turning her back on the Rue de Rivoli and W.H. Smith's, where she had originally planned to go. From time to time, she glanced up at the great obelisk; the new gold pyramid set on its tip gleamed bright against the grey sky.

It had been raining all morning, and the puddles were growing bigger, but she kept away from the road to avoid spray from the traffic. Her feet sank into the soft wet gravel and her black suede shoes glistened like seals. She avoided what puddles she could, listening to the heavy drops of rain from the plane trees beating dully on to the taut skin of her white umbrella. Crinkled orange-brown leaves rose up with the breeze and brushed damply against her legs.

Then she was on cobbles, the raindrops creating little dimples in the water caught between them. She thought of the dimples in Farida's buttocks, and the water splashing over her black shining breasts as she had brushed against her in the shower only an hour before.

The Musée D'Orsay was packed. Van Gogh was drawing the crowds. Round two sides of the wide courtyard, people stood patiently beneath their umbrellas. Once inside, she made her way down the nave of the Museum. She passed the statue of a young

man, his translucent white marble penis at eye level, just waiting to be caressed. But the crowds were too big. She shoved her hand firmly down into her pocket and kept it there.

She turned left to cross quickly through the Manet rooms, but lingered, waylaid by the stare of his nude woman sitting erect on her couch. She stared back at her, trying to catch her gaze. Why so stiff? So white and inscrutable. One hand touching or is it hiding her hairs? Who is she waiting for? And the black girl bringing in the flowers bending low, what is she doing? Announcing another lover?

She tore herself away and with relief reached that spur-of-the-moment destination of hers, the small Courbet room, bright from the natural daylight coming through the large outer wall window of the old station building. The rain was drumming hard against it, sending a dull basso continuo vibrating into the room.

She made for the row of grey-green wicker chairs and chose one opposite Courbet's notorious *Origin of the World*. She would take her time. Wait for thoughts.

A young couple came, the girl nudging her boyfriend, he putting on a half smile. Then a lady on her own, pretending a sudden interest in the landscape paintings next to and above the nude. Behind her she heard a suppressed giggle. A young girl marched past eyes wide open, hand to mouth.

It occurred to her she was sitting just as Courbet must have done. Legs apart. Easel slightly off centre. To the left. Or was it to the right? No, it must have been to the left. To have painted that close, his right knee must have been almost touching the model's opened left thigh. Palette in one hand, the brush hand free to reach out and caress those tight curls, finger his way into her damp slit, arouse her.

Those dark hairs glistened aggressively. She stared them out as she had the Manet. Then followed the lines of the torso. It formed a large upside-down Y, off-balance. From the right leg, aligned with the abdomen, her eye moved upwards, across the top of the picture to the single breast. The nipple in turn sent her gaze over to the top left-hand corner of the canvas, hungry for the rest of the amputated body. But the foreground exercised its pull on her, forcing her to zoom in on the opened thigh and vagina. Several times, she roughly pushed thoughts of Soutine's sad carcasses out of her head. And started again, hopping round the triangle, from nipple to thigh to the truncated shoulder and back.

The wicker of her chair creaked, as unconsciously she found herself crossing her legs then uncrossing them again and moving her weight onto her right buttock. She found herself wanting to reach out like Courbet and touch those damp hairs. But the chair was unyielding, giving her backache. Stopping her fancy.

There was something uncomfortable about the painting too. She had rushed here from the hammam in a state of exhilaration after Farida's massage. But the Courbet made her uneasy. Not that she wanted to snigger. Not like the couples pulling each other past the canvas. No, it wasn't that. Claustrophobia was nearer the mark.

She stared again at the arching breast, with its pink nipple pursed as if trying to speak. The oozing crack, lips slightly open.

No, that was enough. She forced herself out of the chair and stood level with *Storm at Etreta* that hung above the torso. Painted six years later. The sun shining so bright through that fissure in the white cliffs.