

THE PORTRAIT

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1

“You look like you’re sleepwalking,” Amanda said as I entered the artist’s studio after philosophy class, which met way too early in the morning.

I leaned on the counter that angled into the room, tucked my white cane under my arm and tried to squeeze dopiness out of my expression. Her husband, Len, mumbled something from behind his easel. I knew its location from the previous times I’d come here to meet Amanda.

“What are you working on, Len?”

“An abstract based on one of your fellow freshman. I think you know her—Cheryl DiFrancesco?”

“She’s friends with my suitemate, Peter.” Well, more than friends, but no need to get into it.

Len said, “Amanda has a proposition to put to you.”

“Oh?”

“Amanda will tell you.”

Outside, morning sunshine had skimmed the chill from the early spring air. Amanda and I walked across campus to the library, where the college had set aside a room for my readers and my reel-to-reel tape recorder. Amanda read to me for two hours each on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Like her husband, Amanda was an artist, but she was taking a break. “Len’s residency means a nice sabbatical for me, as the workers around here call vacation.”

I said, “Doesn’t this weather make you want to paint?”

“I seem to have suppressed the urge for now. It isn’t false modesty to say Len’s the one with the gift.”

“I’d never let myself even think that.”

“You’re still so young, Terry.”

“So what’s this proposition, Amanda?”

“Len wants to paint you.”

“Well, I’m afraid I don’t take off my clothes for anyone but a woman, and then only one woman at a time.” My bluster entertained me.

“He wants to do a portrait—you know, your head.”

“I’m flattered.” I was skeptical.

“Not flattery. Tell you what. Let’s get your work done, then we can talk about it.”

At the end of our session, I brailled Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” as she read it aloud so I could study it afterwards on my own.

She said, “It’s a little strange to read about a painting, even in a poem. A painting speaks for itself.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t talk about it and get even more out of it.” I recited, “‘The sun shone as it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green water.’ The painting can’t say, ‘as it had to.’ That’s Auden, the poet.”

“What do you think the phrase means, Terry?”

“Something like life is tragic, but life goes on.”

“The painting says that, too. Breughel was an artist of ideas.” She paused. “But talking about a painting is like trying to explain a Beethoven symphony. Explanation helps, but what matters with music is the sound, and what matters with painting is the canvas. I guess I’m saying you can’t really appreciate paintings, not being able to see. I hope you don’t mind.”

I shrugged. “Few things are all or nothing.”

I took her arm. As we trotted down the library’s front steps, she said, “How about we take a swing by the athletic fields?” We turned away from the quad and set out across gradual slopes of grass.

I said, “What exactly does Len want me to do?”

“Sit around for an hour.”

“Without moving?”

“Not like a statue. Len likes to have a model feel at ease so he can capture their expressions, not just some self-conscious photographic still.”

“I’d freeze up.”

“You soon forget yourself.”

“You’ve modeled for him?”

“We all modeled for each other in art school.”

“The face is revealing,” I said.

“Sure is. More than the body.”

Caught up in conversation, we’d picked up speed, and I tripped on the edge of the asphalt path to the science building.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I should have warned you. You know, sometimes I forget you don’t see. Is that a horrible thing to say?”

“My own fault. Don’t make such a fuss, Amanda.”

We headed over more lawn to the ridge overlooking the fields.

“Do you have any notion what Len sees in me?”

“A mobile, expressive face. Most people are more guarded or bland.”

“When I start writing a poem, it’s usually because I’m interested in someone or something, but I always need to move on to some larger idea.”

“Just like Breughel. But for me, there doesn’t need to be a big message with painting. Painting is about the artist’s look on the world and viewers opening their eyes to it. It’s about perceiving.”

“I’d like to think about it overnight.”

“There’s no hurry. We’re not pressuring you.”

2

It felt odd arriving at Len’s with no plans to meet Amanda. As he was finishing up his previous task, I stood just inside the echoing studio and marveled at the notion of my features being transformed into something that might one day be deemed a work of art.

At the far side of the room Len said, “I’m ready for you.” As he directed me by voice to a seat, I felt him staring at my movements. Finding I was looking down, I raised my head. I folded up my cane, dropped it underneath the Windsor chair and sat down.

How to sit? I felt as if I were in my high school yearbook picture session all over again, when I’d wondered what to do with my hands. I found a position with my back straight and hands folded between my knees, which were slightly apart. I didn’t ask if the pose was acceptable, and he didn’t say.

Where to look? It had to be in Len's direction, but he wasn't talking. Fortunately, the methods of his trade involved rustling noises and the hardwood floor tracked the movements of his feet.

When he broke the silence, his voice carried the length of the room.

"Amanda told me about Icarus's white legs disappearing into the green water. You were wondering if paintings need to express ideas. Amanda and I disagree. I believe ideas belong in painting, though they aren't always easy to articulate. Take Impressionism. Impressionism involved colors, natural light, and reflections. It was born and worked out in the paintings. It wasn't intended for words, but out of it came lots of words."

My mind drifted, and I'm sure expressions drifted across my face. Once I noticed the direction of my eyes had strayed to the far left corner of the room, following some trail of thought.

I crossed my legs. A few minutes later I found my left hand clasping my shin. God knew what Len would make of all this, but I felt comfortable, which Amanda had said was the important thing.

Amanda might be the first adult who acted as if we were equals, though I was half her age. Well, most of the time. Her "you're still so young" still nettled.

Feeling at ease with the posture I'd assumed and gazing casually in Len's direction, I felt less the absurdity of someone wanting to paint me. If anyone was suitable for painting, then why not me? I all but said it aloud. Why not me?

"That will do for today," Len said, banging something.

I took a deep breath and stretched. "I'd almost hypnotized myself." Unfolding my cane, I headed for the exit. I was curious about the painting. But what could I ask—"What have you

done with me?"

"Goodbye," Len said. "Oh, and thanks. Let's do a second sitting next week."

Back at the dorm, I lowered myself into our scratched-up wooden armchair and told my suitemate, "Peter, I can't decide if sitting for a portrait is normal or weird."

Turning from his desk to face me, he said, "A lot of normal things are weird, my friend."

"How does Cheryl occupy her mind when she's with Len? It has to be even weirder with no clothes on."

"Cheryl doesn't talk about modeling. I've asked, but nada."

3

Amanda waited until we left the library before saying, "Len was pleased."

"Have you seen what he's done?"

"You can never tell which way he's going. I can never tell with my own work."

Outside the entrance to my dorm, I leaned against the wall and she sat on the end of the stone banister. I pictured her with one leg swinging.

"What are you thinking about?" she said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to go all quiet on you."

"That's all right. I was thinking, too."

"About?"

"About what an idyllic place this campus is. I'm distrustful. It's like you put Adam and Eve in a garden and they fuck up."

"So to speak."

"Right. I mean, here we are in paradise, and all I'm thinking is where we used to live,

Detroit, with all its crime and grime, was more—I don't know—trustworthy.”

“I don't trust this either,” I said. “I almost wish I owned it, so I could be sure of keeping it the way it is.”

“Terry, you sound like one of those people who buy Vermont air in a bottle. Uncap the bottle and it all escapes. This is one time I'm reminded how young you are.”

Second time in two weeks, I was tempted to point out.

She touched my forearm, prelude to “Gotta go. I have to fix up the house for a dinner party. Would you join us one evening? Len and you could get to know each other better.”

4

“Hey guy, knock knock. Can I come in?” It was my suitemate, Peter, standing inside my bedroom door, pretending it wasn't open.

“Haven't you already come in?”

“That doesn't stop me from being polite, does it? Or would you prefer I just act like there ain't no door here and walk in and out whenever I feel like? Huh? Huh?”

“Blow it out your ear, Peter.”

He sat down. “Mind if I sit down?”

“Is that like asking if I mind your coming in?”

“You just don't appreciate good manners. Speaking of blowing, mind if I smoke?”

“Are you telling me I have a choice?”

“You have a choice.”

“Go ahead, light up.” I stood and raised the window as high as it would go.

“You make a guy feel real welcome.” Peter sucked his cigarette into life.

I sat down on the bed, but didn't lean against the wall as I usually did. I could tell he had something he needed to get off his mind.

"I spoke to Cheryl," he said.

"I'm glad. I mean it would be tragic if there weren't a verbal component to your relationship."

"Len's finished the painting she was sitting for, so she's done with modeling."

"I'll be happy when my own stint is over."

"She went back to look at the finished painting and to pick up the check."

"That's a point. I'm not getting paid." I was doing it as a favor to Amanda. Then again, she wasn't getting paid for the reading she did for me.

He made his sucking sound with the cigarette. "So while she was there, she saw the painting Len's doing of you."

"Can't be too abstract."

"You're recognizable all right."

"Don't make that sound like such an atrocity."

"She noticed your eyes are closed in the painting. The only time I've seen you with your eyes closed is when you doze off in class."

I thought back to my session with Len. "Funny. I didn't remember my eyes being closed. I did notice at one point that my gaze had wandered off to a corner of the room as my attention drifted. But most of the time I was looking right at him."

As I tried to take it all in, Peter made a sucking sound. "Terry, he's painting you as a blind guy."

5

Cheryl stopped by the next day. I let her in and told her Peter had called to say he'd be ten minutes late. She sat at his desk.

Returning to the armchair, I said, "Cheryl, I'm glad you told Peter about the painting Len's doing of me. I know the two of you are on your way out, but could we talk about it some time?"

"I don't know what there is to add, but sure." She suggested we meet the next afternoon.

As I approached the library on Saturday, she was waiting halfway up the front steps, not knowing if I'd be coming from inside or out. Calling to me, she descended to the sidewalk, and I took the arm of the woman I couldn't help but think of as an extension of Peter.

We walked to the ridge overlooking the fields. On this side of the hill, narrow stone steps had been cut into the slope, and there was a landing every fifteen steps or so where ledges made solid seats. At the second landing, she suggested we sit down. She had a view over the fields and back up toward the college's southern buildings. The wind gusting through the trees gave me a feel for the expanse of landscape. Had Amanda known how much I visualized my surroundings, she might have been less worried about discussing Breughel with me.

"I think the place to begin," I said, "is by telling me about the painting."

"Well," she said to the woods in the distance, then stopped. In that one syllable, I heard her reluctance to say something difficult to someone she hardly knew.

"Well," she repeated, "There's a tinge of red in the top half of the canvas, and the lower half is in shadow. He's caught the shape of your face, and there are hints of what he'll do with your hair and mouth, but he was clearly concentrating on your eyelids and brows and the bridge of your nose."

“And my eyes are closed.” Slumped forward, hand supporting chin, I surrendered with a shiver to the chill in the air. Had my mother been here, she’d be correcting my posture.

“Do you mind my asking what upsets you about that?” she said. “I mean I guess it’s obvious, but maybe it isn’t.”

I straightened my back. “I suppose I thought he was painting me for myself.”

“And what would that be, do you think?”

“I know lots of things I’m not – scientist, athlete, party organizer.”

“How about poet?”

“Much too grand,” I said, though it brought a telltale smile to my face. “How about a work in progress?”

“If Len got to the truth of who you are, that would be something, wouldn’t it?”

“I refuse to accept the truth about me is blindness, but when Len paints my eyes closed, that’s what he’s saying. It’s how he sees me.”

“One way he sees you.”

“But the way he chose to represent me.”

“And that upsets you because?”

I recalled a moment from the time when my vision was fading. I’d closed my eyes, held a leaf and traced its moist undulations with a fingertip. Then I’d opened my eyes and observed the even tinier striations and gradations of green. Sight discerned the millimeters that touch glided over. Did it mean those features of mine that Len had dabbed on his canvas were truer than those I knew?

There was a poem here, if I were capable of writing it: The window on the soul gone blank, lights out, curtains drawn. I could work in Aristotle’s aphorism that the soul never thinks

without a picture. Was vision essential to humanness, the poem would ask. I'd say no, and the sentiment would be genuine. But there on the hillside, making wild surmises about Len's painting, I felt marginalized in a world where a single picture speaks a thousand words.

I'd been dishonest with myself. Len hardly knew me. I offered only one subject for him. The shut eyes confirmed it.

I burst out, "You know what, Cheryl? It wouldn't matter what else he does with the portrait. What I already know about it would obliterate everything I want to be."

"What do you mean, Terry?" She sounded frightened.

"I mean that if Len paints me as blind, that's all I'll be. I'll cease to be a poet, or student, or whatever else there might be in me."

"I think I understand."

Quiet fell between us.

"Okay," I announced, "enough on the painting." I racked my brains for something else to talk about, but my mind was a wall.

She said, "Shall we head back?"

Nodding, I rose stiffly from the cold stone ledge.

6

When I arrived at Len's studio, he greeted me cordially. I leaned an elbow on the counter near the room's exit.

"Come around and take a seat," he said, dragging a chair across the wood floor toward me. We sat down facing each other.

"The painting you're doing of me," I started.

“Yes?”

“I understand you’re showing me with my eyes closed.”

“Ah, Cheryl.” He spoke down, as if to himself. Then he looked back up at me. “Does that upset you?”

He knew it did. Why else would I bring it up? “I thought from Amanda that your interest had to do with what you saw as my expressiveness.”

“It does.”

I recognized the trap I’d set for myself. Expressiveness and blindness weren’t incompatible. My mind clamped shut.

He sat silent, clearly waiting for my next move. He no doubt guessed the cause of my concern, but he wasn’t going to say it for me.

I opted for stubbornness. “I didn’t realize you were going to paint me as blind.”

“I could tell you, Terry, that I’m not painting you as blind—”

“Despite my eyes being closed.” I stared, eyes open, at him.

“But as a young man in repose,” he finished.

“That’s what eyes being closed means?”

“I said I could tell you that, but I didn’t. To be honest, I’m not sure where the painting’s going. You suggest certain images to me and, because of the kind of painter I am, certain ideas.”

“One of which is blindness,” I said.

“One of which is, yes, blindness.”

In my intentness, I’d been sitting forward. Exhaling, I leaned back.

“May I ask why that upsets you?” he said, echoing Cheryl. Except now I felt under attack.

“Because,” I said, “blindness is so sensational, that’s all people will see.”

“See blindness,” he mused. “Maybe that’s the point. Telling people not to look away from blindness. Not to treat it as something secret and shameful, like a scar or a family tragedy.”

“That’s your intention?” I said, with a belligerence I hadn’t meant.

“I’m thinking aloud. Although I’m a painter with ideas, a painting can’t be just an idea. It’s not a static thing. A good painting keeps moving in the viewer’s mind.”

“Len,” I said, leaning forward again, “can’t you understand? I’m the only blind student—only blind anyone—at this college. A picture of me with my eyes closed will forever mark me as the epitome of blindness. Years from now, my classmates will see my photograph in a newspaper, and their first thought will be, oh yeah, the blind guy.”

“You’re planning on being famous?” he said. “There’s every reason to think you will be.”

“I was giving an example. More likely they’ll see me waiting to catch a bus.”

“Let me put this to you,” he said. “Cheryl is that rare woman, a true blonde. Everyone is drawn to her hair. Does that mean that’s all she is?”

“That’s my fear: that for all the talk around here about the life of the mind, we’re Pavlovian dogs before images.”

“You’re a freshman, aren’t you?”

“Young, as Amanda keeps telling me. What’s that got to do with it?”

“What you’re saying . . .” He cut himself short. Then he said, “Terry, what you’re doing is reducing human relationships to the bare-bones physical, which is what you’re accusing me of doing, isn’t it?”

Once again he had me. I valued the life of the mind. I believed image wasn’t everything. Even so, I wanted to protect mine. I could live with the contradiction.

“Terry,” he said, “you’re telling me you want me to stop. That’s it, right? You feel I misrepresented what I planned to do.”

He was asking too many questions. It allowed me to latch on to the easy one. “I’m not saying you misrepresented.”

“Amanda told you I saw you as expressive. You made certain assumptions from that.”

He sighed loudly, stood up and walked to the back of the studio. “I’ll tear it up as soon as you leave.”

I sat speechless. I wanted to tell him not to destroy it, but hadn’t that been my objective, even if I hadn’t admitted it to myself? Okay then, I should thank him. But I was overwhelmed.

I stood, located the counter and, following it around to the corridor, said, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

7

Outside, the texture of the brilliant sun, the aromas of grass, stone and earth and intermittent breeze made a layered landscape for my mind’s opposing factions. I’d told Amanda I’d like to make this place my own, but would I really? I knew nothing about managing property. It would fall into ruin. Except as I’d also said, few things are all or nothing. I might not do it perfectly, but ruin wasn’t the only possible outcome.

Just now I’d taken a stand. It had gone badly, but maybe the next time I asserted myself, I’d do better.

By prearrangement I met Peter at the cafeteria. He got coffee for us and chose a table out of hearing range from the other morning-subdued students.

I owned up to my misgivings about my confrontation with Len. “If I’d had antennae

coming out of my head, you know he would have worked them in.”

“But you don’t go around with your eyes closed. It’s not who you are. That’s what this is about.”

I gulped coffee and crashed the cup onto the saucer. “Okay, so that’s what this is all about. Now what do I say to Amanda?”

“Leave it be. She’s not scheduled to read until tomorrow, right? Let Len explain and wait for her to bring it up when she’s ready. Piss-poor position to be in, but that’s how it goes.”

We parted outside the cafeteria, Peter for class and I for the dorm. The phone was ringing as I unlocked the door to our suite. It was Amanda.

“I’m going away for a week, maybe longer,” she said. “I think you should find a replacement. I’m sorry about this short notice. It’s a family emergency.”

Palm pressed against Peter’s desk, I struggled for words. In the end, I said, “I hope it isn’t too serious.”

“I just hope you find someone better.”

The End