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## leper/cat

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**leper/cat**

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MFA Creative Writing, University of Missouri – St. Louis

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## leper/cat

### Part One

Each of the trees close to the village were marked with a painted yellow star against their grey ashen bark to signal a removal. Po counted them, his body wrapped in white cloth from head to toe like mummified remains, leaned on a walking stick as he followed his two companions, the Soldier and the Franciscan, steadily up the mountainside.

The Soldier, iron helmed and in rusted hauberk, stayed well ahead planting his bardiche in the mossy loam, leading a mule that jangled with Po's possessions. White curls flanked a stubbled face that looked beleaguered, too old for wars but too stubborn for peace. He snuck the mule apples from a shouldered rucksack and carried on conversations with the animal, humming little songs, only staring back to make sure Po and the clergyman had not been lost. The Franciscan stayed beside Po, but kept at least three trees away. He had chosen simple brown robes and a gnarled walking staff for the ascent. Between strides, Po could hear the light jingle of prayer beads within the priest's folds. As the light began to die, the Soldier lit a lantern, and Po followed it like a willow-o-wisp ever upward.

At the midway point the three stopped. The Franciscan went behind a tree to relieve himself. As Po listened to the steady stream of urine hitting the underbrush, the Soldier pulled a dirty knife from his belt and produced a wedge of disgustingly colorful cheese. He cut away a sliver and licked the knife clean. Po sat silent beside a tree, counting his fingers. They were all there. All nine.

“The Arabs revere lepers,” the Soldier said, offering a bit of cheese to Po who shook his head. “That’s what I’ve heard, at least. Have you heard that?”

Po ignored the question. He let his tongue lap around his gums finding the recesses of his missing teeth. He tasted the sick and went back to his personal inventory. All nine fingers. All twelve teeth. He couldn’t feel his own toes, but he did remove his boots and count them. Po felt fairly intact. The Soldier and the Franciscan did not see, or chose not to notice, when Po fell along the way. Twice it had happened. And both times Po quickly unwrapped his legs and his hands to make sure no wayward stone had bruised the skin. He had been fortunate, only bloated and rough skin. The tip of his left pinky was missing and buried somewhere in the village of Gola, but the man was still intact.

“Is your nose completely gone, sir?” the Soldier asked.

“I am without nose,” Po answered. The Soldier could not see the hole in the middle of Po’s face where his nose had once been, only the wool wrappings that went startlingly flat between his eyes and his mouth.

“Does that...well, does that impair the smelling, as it were? Can you smell?” the Soldier asked.

All of Po’s senses had been dulled by leprosy, but he could not pass up the opportunity for banter, not with someone as willing as this soldier in rusted uniform.

“I can smell you just fine, if that is what you mean. Through the cloth and all. Or is that the mule?”

The Soldier tossed his wedge of cheese aside and stepped forward, slightly, leaning on his polearm, "And it is true that you do not feel pain? And that if you were to bruise, or cut the skin, or be bloodied in some *misunderstanding* that a piece of you would fall away?"

"It is likely, sir," Po listened for the monk. He heard the slight whistle of a hymn in the darkening woods.

"The King of England had you all executed, I hear."

"You hear many things, sir."

"Isn't that like the English? The Arabs put you on a pedestal, so the English lop off your heads? I am not sure which I prefer. They say you lot, you cursed, eventually go mad? Are you mad, maestro?"

"Sudden reverence and sudden execution may cause a mental imbalance, sir. Being stacked in sickbeds, seeing limbs carried off to blacken and burn, being flea-bitten, lice-infested, being told to chant like flayed sinners does not strike me as sanity, either."

"Ah, but you cannot feel," the Soldier smiled, "Fleas are a small matter to those who cannot feel their bites. You insist you can smell without a nose, and I believe you, but do not lepers become blind, deaf, do they not lose the ability to smell? They cannot feel. This is known. What matter is filth to the unfeeling?"

"I suppose I am the envy of lice, sir."

The Soldier laughed and got a little too close, the clotted stink of the cheese on his breath seeped through the wrapped wool on Po's face. He coughed, which sent the old man scrambling. It was Po's turn to laugh, but only softly and muffled.

The Franciscan emerged shaking his robes.

“You will not go deaf,” the monk corrected, “though your eyes will fail you, I am afraid. And you so loved to paint. They have your portrait of the Burgomaster in Slovbank Hall – it is a remarkable piece, though I hear the Burgomaster’s wife Lady Roth did not agree with the inclusion of the skull. She claimed bad omens in the pigment. But I seemingly recall a painting of Philip of France with a skull, next to a feathered helm atop a desk, and some remarked it was a symbol of morality. To face our death makes us humble. Now that I am thinking on it,” the Franciscan furrowed his brow and Po saw a wet stain on his robes where the urine had splashed against the fabric, “Perhaps it was Philip of Spain.”

“Were not the lepers executed in France, Father?” the Soldier asked still brushing off leaves from his hauberk.

“Oh, yes,” the monk replied. He looked at Po and smiled, warmly, “You are certainly lucky, Peiterova. You have been spared the indignities of your condition,” the Franciscan pulled a wineskin from somewhere beneath his billows and uncorked the stopper, “The physician at the leprosarium where we found you said a woman clawed her own eyes out, the skin of her cheeks fell away like a muddy bank in a torrent. They left her body in the garden, near the poplar. They thought the tree a comfort. Such a disease,” and with deep sigh and a good shake of the head, the priest lifted the wineskin and let little violet rivulets bleed out from the corners of his mouth.

Po had known the woman, only briefly. The leprosarium was an old debtors’ prison and run much in the same manner. There was no talk of miracles or cures. It was clear, from the moment your feet hit the cold stone, looking at the grim faced guards and wary nuns, that it was a final resting place – a ramshackle quarantine of burning bodies and fragrant oils. The rooms

were no more than a wash basin, a small table for a single candle and some parchment, and a bed of wooden planks (which irritated the skin a great deal). They would eat hard bread and weak broth twice a day and many would pray throughout the night, so even when Po closed his eyes he heard the reverberation of psalms haunting the stones. The woman's name was Mary. She kept to herself, and spoke to herself. Her skin peeled away easily and she would remove it in long strips and consume it until her face looked crisscrossed in red, sickening lines. She took a piece of stolen glass and cut across her index finger so it grew purple and decrepit and then chewed it off and spit it into her bedpan. It was one attempt after another, until she did not come out into the yard for meals or reflection. It was one morning Po walked the courtyard and saw eight nuns dragging Mary's body from a length of rope through the dirt, blood pouring from her vacant eye-sockets, and laid her down beside the garden – a bench, a tree, and a bit of tended grass. The nuns kneeled, silent. Po did not see them leave. In the early morning he went out again and saw them still there, in their flowing habits, and Po wondered at the cold comforts buried in that silence.

“We still have light,” the Franciscan said, “No need to lean on me, maestro.”

“Not for an hour, at least,” Po said.

He was not blind, but his eyesight was going. Most lepers lost their eyesight when they lost their eyelids, but Po's eyesight was going as naturally as his father's had, the butcher, who couldn't walk on his own by the time he was forty. The dimming light in the forest was difficult to navigate. The trees became vague threats, the underbrush hid deadly roots. But Po followed the Soldier's lantern, the jangle of the Franciscan's prayer beads, the cookery slapping against the mule's hindquarters and the bit of song slurring through the priest's lips.

When the time did come, when Po couldn't even make out the glow of the lantern, he called out for the Franciscan who propped up Po's body and shakily guided him up the mountain path. His companions stopped often. Argued.

"It is this way, Father."

"Are you certain? We should have come across it by now."

"Time is different at night."

"Are there wolves?"

"Not this far up in the hills, but that's why I am here. Any wolves will be more interested in the mule than three of us. But you need not worry."

The last quarter mile they went above the tree-line and Po felt the breeze on his eyes, the rest of him bastioned in gauze. They crept slowly, then – each step taken carefully as if not to wake the mountain.

"Even in the moonlight, maestro, the mountain is a wonder," the Franciscan whispered.

"Describe to me," Po said.

"It rises, purple, above a bed of autumn oranges dyed blue with the night. The gray of the cliffs blend seamlessly with the sky, edges wreathed in moonlit flames. The waters are like glowing ley-lines cutting through stone. There's a lake, maestro, far off in the distance surrounded by tall trees. Its waters quench the eyes of thirst. We come to your cabin, shortly. I see it there, a good place, nestled peacefully in the calming shadow of the mountainside."

"You have not lost your talent for words, priest," Po said.



Before his skin grew rough and his fingers stiffened and his possessions burned – Po had worked for the monk in a small basilica. For three months Po painted the ceiling in the image of God, praying that the shaky scaffolds would hold him. On the edges of that basilica’s ceiling Po painted the image of the Franciscan in the face of a cherub at the borders of Heaven. The basilica was burned to the ground during the feuding of two lords. The painting had been charred away in black soot so only blue shocks of Heaven could be made out, and limbs – God’s right hand emerging from black ash. *The sight of it is worse than absence*, the monk had cried when he found Po buried in lice covered blankets.

“There are three steps and then the landing,” the Franciscan said, now several feet away, “The door does not have a handle. You need only push it open, maestro. Shall I describe the inside to you?”

“No,” Po said as he inched forward reaching his hand out trying to find a railing.

“It is modest,” the Franciscan continued, “But good for reflection. Do you need any help?”

“No,” Po found a beam of rough wood and steadied himself, pushing his feet to the side hitting the first step. He would spare the monk. After all, he would need to find the steps in the dark eventually.

“Shall I place your effects on the ground, then?” the Soldier asked.

“Please, sir. Set them under an awning so that they will not get wet should it rain.”

“We can set them inside the cabin, maestro,” the priest suggested.

“I am liable to trip over them in the dark. I’d rather not take the risk. I will go through them in the morning.”

“There is no awning,” the Soldier said, “but I will place them beside the cottage. You do not have much.”

Po heard the unfastening of the mule’s load and the crash and tumble of pots and leather sacks hitting the ground. He made it to the top of the stairs and leaned against the front of the cottage. The scent of the Franciscan’s wine and the moldy wood came through the gauze, as did the mountain air. Placing his walking stick against the cottage wall Po began to unwrap his face. He placed the wrappings in a bundle on the front porch. He knew his skin was rough and splotchy, unnatural valleys carved their way around his eyes, and into his cheeks. He must have been a horrific sight for the gentle man beside him.

“Peiterova...” the monk may have placed his hand on Po’s shoulder. “I have...letters. I have letters from your wife, maestro. She sent them to the leprosarium, but they were withheld for reasons they would not tell me.”

“Take them with you. I do not wish to see them.”

“Peiterova, please. I do not know if I will return to this place. I will leave them with you and if you do not wish to read them, that is fine. Destroy them if you want. But they do not belong to me. I will place them in the cabin.”

“Do what you feel you must.”

Po could not fight the moment. Even though he could not feel his legs, he was exhausted all the same. His insides burned. He wished for sleep. The letters he could burn in the morning.

For an hour the two men stayed with Po, but the impatience of the Soldier could be heard with every shake of his clunky armor until, finally, the Franciscan gave a heavy sigh and reached for his walking stick.

“There is a boat house not more than quarter mile from here, to the west,” the Franciscan said as he prepared to leave, “There you will be able to draw up fresh water. I have also made arrangements for food to be brought to you once a week from the village. I am afraid it will be mostly vegetables, but I insisted that you be brought fish when available. The young man will blow a hunting horn to announce his arrival. He asks that you do not look at him and pay him no attention. He will lay your food on the porch and leave.”

“We need to go, Father,” the Soldier’s wary voice was heard down near the woods.

“Yes, yes,” the Franciscan’s voice was near, “I will return to your wife.”

“Tell her I am dead, father.”

“I will,” the good priest said, “And I will pray for you, Peiterova.”

Po, standing erect on the porch, listened to his two companions leave, vague moonlight wrapping shadows in his eyes. The Soldier’s hauberk rustled with every distant step until it was lost. Po unwrapped his hands and placed the gauze lightly on the ground. The feeling in the tips of the fingers was gone and he could not tell where the door to the cabin was, so he pushed against the wall, finding a window, and then once again the stairs. He moved confidently forward and pushed the wooden door open and tried to find images in the dark.

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“You can have a life here,” said the well perfumed Physician to the new arrivals in the courtyard of an old prison, “We offer respite. Reflection. Services. A place where your disease can run its course without the unease of others to weigh on your already addled minds.” The Physician, of which Peiterova could guess an age of maybe sixty, motioned the nuns that flanked him to come forward with blankets and buckets. They offered these things with glowing smiles, and many, perhaps deprived of joy for so long took these new possessions with tears in their eyes.

Peiterova counted twelve new arrivals, including himself. He gripped the blanket to his chest and let the bucket hit the stone floor of the courtyard. He only nodded, dully, as the nun who handed him these two items said a soft blessing. Peiterova saw the other lepers peeking their heads out from a low barracks. Passed this building he saw wisps of smoke. The whole place smelled like lavender oil and char. He looked back toward the entrance – a barred gate and walls too tall to risk the fall. There were men on the parapets, grim and dark and full of truth. *This is your final resting place* their stern glances seemed to impart with equal parts cruelty and pity.

“I know there’s a prevailing discourse that your disease is the product of some curse from the Almighty,” the Physician continued, “but we have not arrived at that conclusion. You will not be harmed within these walls.”

A few coughs.

They were then directed into a line so that their names, professions and former place of residence could be recorded. Peiterova, as soon as he could, made his way to the back of the line letting his blanket (that looked old, and smelled of dander) drag across the courtyard floor.

They were handed bread and half-rotten apples. Peiterova ate the bread and stuck a few apples in his pocket. He could crush the skins. He could crush the skins and make paint.

The man in front of him was a clerk. His name was Aleksander. He lived in Straka. Aleksander asked about visitors, but was quickly ushered away toward the barracks.

“Your name, sir?” the Physician asked Peiterova still watching Aleksander being led away.

“Peter,” he said.

“Your real name, sir.”

“There are some who call me Peter,” Peiterova corrected, “but my proper name is Peiterova Zyliksa. I am under the assumption you know me already, Physician?”

“I was made aware of your arrival this morning,” the man said dryly scribbling Peiterova’s name on a curling piece of paper.

“Then you must be aware of my work?”

“I saw a statue that you crafted in an old church in Hhaskel. It seemed well made.”

“Is that your professional opinion? As a physician? The woman was well-proportioned?”

“I was made aware of your arrival by a man in Gola with a writ from the burgomaster there, that you should be given all affordable care here, that your dignity remain intact, for your cultural contributions over the years. That you remain here,” the Physician wrote the word *artist* next to Peiterova’s name.

“They tore that statue down, I believe,” Peiterova said.

“That is a shame,” the Physician responded, curt.

“They removed the limbs and broke the rest with hammers. Probably the best the way to do it. Would you agree, Physician? In your professional opinion? As someone who removes limbs?”

“Everything is in order,” the Physician ignored the question, “Zyliska, I do not make it a habit to judge a man on who he was before he enters this place. Every person here deserves to live in peace, to let the disease run its course, and find comfort in the company of others. I am not interested in your guilt.”

“That is a comfort, Physician. Though I would protest my guilt.”

“There is a reason why your paintings were burned and your statues crushed,” at this the Physician rose from the little desk he had set out and reached for a jacket draped around his chair. He directed a nun to come forward, “See Zyliska to his new room. And give the apples he has in his pocket to someone who is hungry.”

Four months. That was all Peiterova could take before allowing himself the necessity of routine. Bread and broth. Prayer. Games of association. His daydreams of climbing the wall turned into daydreams of falling. And then, not even the small promise of death was enough. For all the talk of comfort on that first day, it did not ease the sight of a severed leg being wheeled away and thrown on a smoldering fire behind the barracks. The lice and the fleas bit into the skin, so that every leper had the added discomfort of being pock-marked with little red dots on their arms and legs and neck and face. Peiterova got to know his fellow lepers. Most were gathered in the night, by the behest of their own families – and carted, sometimes more than a hundred miles – to be sequestered away out of mind. Some believed they had been conspired against. Peiterova only said that he was a lonely man. A bachelor.

Once a leper got over the idea of never leaving, and then realized they had not the will to kill themselves, the day-to-day became – as designed – a sort of reliable comfort. It was a common statement that they were lucky, and that had they been lepers in any other place, they would have been executed and burned alive. Not being burned alive was a badge of honor. And as the days wore on, and Peiterova got lost in the doldrums of pointless walks and ineffectual prayer, some lepers simply disappeared, quietly. They tried to hide the bodies, the limbs, the awful stench, but just beyond their small little barracks were the smoldering fires where the missing went.

“Another year,” Peiterova would whisper to some nameless friend on the anniversary of his arrival. They had nicknames. The General. The Boatman. The Candle-Maker. The Yeoman. The Maestro. Old titles that had no meaning now. The Physician changed, too. He was seldom seen walking the courtyard, until eventually most of the lepers believed he had been replaced with another perfumed smiling man.

When the Franciscan arrived with the Soldier in the dead of night to take Peiterova from the leprosarium, the walls of the barracks reverberated with the prayers of the other lepers. What small comforts in the daily routines could not overcome the steady neglect. Bodies, no longer hid, were stacked in wheelbarrows to be burned later. The prison burgeoned with the mad. In fact, Peiterova was no longer sure that all the imprisoned *were* lepers.

The Soldier stayed within the halls of that wretched dungeon tapping his bardiche on the stone, nervously. The Franciscan, eyes darting, tossed a pile of cloth on the floor.

“Your hair has fallen away,” was the glum whisper of the priest.

The monk moved to the doorway and closed it shut, shakily ordering the Soldier to stand guard. He moved to Peiterova, still kneeling on the ground, but he didn’t dare get close.

“The day has come, my friend. The Lord has seen that you should leave here in all haste. Given your contributions to the many nobles over the years, it has been deemed a travesty that you should spend the rest of your days in this wretched place, and so we travel together to seclusion, where you may have peaceful respite from this horror,” he lowered his voice then, “This is the work of your wife, sir. She has made it so, but you must not speak of it. Not until we are safely in the wilderness.”

“I do not wish to speak on it,” rasped Peiterova.

“Then we will not,” the monk reached into his robes and pulled from it a glass vial, “But this also your wife’s doing. It is an opium. A high concentration of laudanum.”

“And what should I do with this opium?”

“There is enough here to...*finish* things.”

“Finish?” Peiterova raised to his feet and gathered up his little possessions on the single wooden table in his cell, “I have no intention of finishing things, Father. Why would you have me succumb to such a damnable sin?”

“This is not God’s plan for you, maestro. This punishment is grievous. And you will not be safe outside these walls. This is your wife’s doing, as I have said, but no one else’s. If certain people should find out you have left this place they will seek out and kill you. There is talk, as well, that the mood shifts on the very nature of your disease and these people, these pitiable people, will be burned alive soon. It’s doubly important that you leave now. But should there be assassins at your door than consider the opium. Consider your wife.”

“She has made her choice,” Peiterova said.



“It was not a choice, maestro. You would have her throw herself from a tower? You would have her a widow and begging for pennies on the streets? You would ask that of her?”

“Yes. I would ask that.”

“Then the rumors are true. This disease does turn men to stone.”

“It does no such thing. It does nothing to the man but make him numb. It turns the world cruel. That’s what it does, Father. Or do you not hear the prayers even now? Do you not smell that awful smoke?”

“There is nothing that can be done for them,” the Franciscan said, defeated.

“Because they didn’t paint worthless baubles for vain men?”

“Your *wife* is saving your life, not your paintings. Even as I stand here they look for your art, to destroy it. He’ll erase you from this country. That’s the truth. While your memory lingers in your wife’s thoughts, he will not relent. Not while you live. But your wife will remain, and think you alive and be tortured by the thought. And he will not relent this fact. He will not accept that somewhere in this vast country a single man lives that keeps her in that state of hope. How long until he tires of it? How long until she is hung for her insolence? She does not give you this opium for your own sake. In some fashion you will die. Burned here. Murdered elsewhere,” the Franciscan held up the vial of liquid, “but this is a release for the sake of her mind. That you choose to go in peaceful slumber, not the victim of disease or violence.”

Peiterova grabbed the vial and regarded it in the dim light.

“I do not promise I will use it,” he placed the vial in a small cloth bag nearest his cot, “But sir, will you do me a favor?”

“Of course, maestro.”

“Clearly you have the ear of my wife and I am grateful for that. When you return to her will you say that I died here, in the leprosarium? That my body was burned?”

“Yes,” the monk glumly promised, “I will do this.”

They left, quietly. They traveled for leagues during the day and camped at dusk. Each morning Po looked behind him and watched for the billows of smoke on the horizon.

\*

Po used his walking stick to discover the dimensions of the cabin. There was a long table near the window, which he managed *not* to break with his sightless prodding. He heard papers fall to the floor. The letters. There was a small fireplace and a bed. The rest would remain a mystery until the morning. Po unwrapped his body and threw the strips of cloth aside. He felt the unevenness of his hands, but not the hands themselves, only the bumps and valleys, how bloated they had become and the slight curl that was beginning to take shape at their very tips. He was sure that the door to the cabin was still open, but he was too exhausted to find the ropes to tie it in the dark. He scrambled to the side of the bed and kneeled.

He whispered the name of the Lord. And then the name of his wife.

*Elaine.*

But nothing came after. He smelled the mold and dander from the blankets on the bed and pulled them off. The mattress was weatherworn and uncomfortable. Though his feelings were impaired, the awkward dips in the bed where something had soaked through made it hard

to get comfortable. After a few hours he left the bed and laid out the ratty blankets and settled on the wood planks of the cabin floor. He rubbed the nub of his missing pinky.

Elaine had placed his first tooth in a glass vial and hid it. When he lost another three teeth and the skin began to irritate him and he couldn't bend his fingers as easily, he hinted that the disease may have been in his body. She ignored him. *I won't hear it, maestro.* Next, when the tingles in the fingers and the lips were turning into only vague touches, he told his wife not to kiss him. Do not sleep near me. These demands carried little weight. When his skin started getting rough and splotchy, Elaine bought salves and creams and oils. She laid them out in their little glass vials and explained their miraculous qualities. *This one in the morning, maestro. This one after a bath. Use this one before riding a horse. And this one, this one is for...well, for us, before we bed.* He would apply these creams religiously, until they seemed pointless comforts for the sake of his wife. When it was clear no magic oils would cure him, Elaine made him a room separate from her own. She smiled at his paintings. Told him to rest. He lost the tip of his pinky. Most of his teeth fell out. Elaine could not hide him, or his pieces, forever.

But Po figured he was well hidden now. Not that anyone would come looking. His teeth in a vial. Remains. Small bits that had no body.

\*

The blast of a hunting horn woke him the next morning. Po, in the light coming through the window, took in the cabin. He saw the table, strewn with the letters, many of which had fallen to the floor. There was indeed a fireplace, but no cooking pot. The door was slightly opened and he saw where it could be tied off with two dangling, thin ropes. The bed and blankets looked as terrible as they smelled, covered in brown stains and putrid crust. In the

corner of the room he saw a small crate that he had missed the night before. He got up and hobbled over to it. Within was a rusted saw, a spool of twine, calipers, a few nails, a ball-hammer, a wood-chisel and a dead mouse. Perhaps a woodworker had lived here, Po thought.

He went to the window and saw a small man climbing up the stony path to the cabin with a load of foodstuffs on his back. He looked no more than sixteen or seventeen, dressed in plain brown garb, a rope belt holding up his britches, and a wooden horn bobbing against the side of his leg. He wore a cut canvas sac as a cap that flopped over the side of his head.

“Please, go away from the window,” the man shouted, catching Po spying on him, “I do not wish to see you.”

Po went from the window to the side of the door where he could see the man’s shadow emerge on the porch.

“What is your name?” Po asked.

“Please, do not talk to me,” the man responded. “The old monk told me to bring you fish, but I couldn’t get none. Maybe next time. The squash is bruised and starting to go. Eat that first.”

“I will,” Po said. “Thank you.”

“I am leaving now. Please do not come out until I am well down in the trees.”

“I promise. I will remain in my cabin.”

He waited a few minutes until he was sure the young man had left before dragging his sack of food inside. The squash was rotten, but the seeds were intact. He could plant them and start a garden. He was not sure how long the village below would keep up the charade of

bringing him food. Perhaps the Franciscan had threatened them with other-worldly damnation, but sooner or later, they would forget him and so Po would have to plant a garden. There were small red potatoes, leeks, a few onions, plenty of cabbage, kohlrabi and a bit of horseradish. There were plenty of vegetables, but he could tell they were picked from a sickening stock. They were giving him the remains.

Once he had divided the vegetables he headed outside.

The Franciscan hadn't lied. Po took in the wide vista where, rolling down like steady waves of green emerald waters, the vast forests were dipped with reds and crimsons. It was like a spilled cornucopia. He saw the village down below; a stubborn sandbar against a river of trees. There was a gleaming lake miles away that emerged from the mountains like a jeweler spilling hot silver onto a perfect mold.

He went to retrieve his things.

At first, Po thought some great wind had come down from the mountain and blown his possessions across the grass, but he saw his entire load had been ransacked, his packs were torn open. Reams of parchment were scattered and splashes of color was blasted against the grass and the side of the cabin. The canisters in which he kept his paints had been smashed against a nearby rock. His clothing had fared no better, torn and tattered. Po desperately searched the ground, kicking pieces of his things aside, until he found the bottle wrapped in paper, undisturbed. He placed the opium in one of the empty bags that was still intact and began to salvage what he could. The paints were destroyed. And only a few pieces of parchment could be saved. His clothes had been ripped, save a travel coat that had been splashed with bits of red. He bundled this up and laid it on the porch. Only his cooking pots seemed to have survived the ordeal.

Once he had gathered everything he could, he examined the side of the cabin more thoroughly. He had heard nothing the night before, but nonetheless, he could see claw marks raked against the wood of the cabin an inch wide. He tore away a splinter and examined it, carefully.

He thought maybe a bear. Po had seen a bear once, as a young man, stabbed to death on a stage in the city of Popovich. He had not heard of bears living in these mountains, only wolves, and the wolves stayed below the tree line. He shook the thought out of his head and went back inside the cabin.

He had his cooking pots. He could make more paint. Truthfully, he had not packed anything of personal significance. All of that was taken from him before he left for the leprosarium. The last of paintings, what he referred to jokingly as his *inflammation period*, were confiscated and burned. They did that. To the lepers. They would burn their things and when the whole conflagration had settled, priests would come and pray over the ash, and the ash would be washed away. Arbitrary rules would be set by magistrates:

*This plot of land cannot be built upon for eight months.*

*The ash must be buried. Not near the well. Not near the church.*

*The daughter must be cloistered. The son must be castrated.*

Po had learned these past few years the temporary nature of *things*. Possessions were lost, destroyed, burned. Even pieces of yourself could be cut away and buried and set on the fire. Po began to view the impermanence of himself the same way he viewed the fleeting existence of a good meal or an expensive shirt. Parts of him would fall away, eventually. Nine fingers. Ten toes. Twelve teeth. He could make due with rotted vegetables and torn cloth.

Po wrapped himself in his traveling coat and headed toward the boat house.

The river came down from the mountain and was flanked by thin copses of trees. It was wide enough to be dangerous, with small whirling eddies. The boathouse was a ruin standing with three walls just beside the muddy bank, which was marked with small white flowers. A wooden pier extended precariously from a raised platform where the current lapped violently below. Po slowly approached, leaning on his staff, navigating the underbrush and the rocks around the bank. He had trained his eyes always to look in front of his feet, dart up, and then back. He steadied himself against one of the boathouse walls and surveyed the area. Covered in clover was a rusted bear-trap. He removed the lichen and examined the brown-golden hue that covered the metal. He could scrape it. Mix it. He found a bucket near the pier to draw up water from the river. The wooden bottom glistened with spider eggs. Po carefully lowered himself on the sloping bank and began rinsing the eggs out, washing the bottom with a little bit of torn cloth he had brought with him.

It was then that the cat appeared. Its long black body emerged and snaked down to the water's edge, right near the boathouse, pink tongue rapidly drinking. Po froze in place. The beast was the length of two men, at least. Though its body looked malnourished, its muscles rippled. Water splashed on its deep purple flanks. Pock-marked on the ebony fur were splotches of color – brown, red, green, orange – and especially across its jowls and face were shocks of bright yellow and fuchsia. Po had found the culprit that raided his things and his heart stopped. He was too lazy to tie the door off. Luckily, the cat was too lazy to come inside and eat the artist.

Po slowly filled the bucket and rose. The cat raised its head, and Po could see a small chain hanging from a metal collar clasped around its neck. Then its great black body darted and moved soundlessly from the bank and down toward the trees. Po stood there for many minutes

gripping the bucket tightly to his chest. He slung the bear-trap over his shoulder and made his way back to the cabin.

The first thing he did was take the chisel and hammer from the crate and began scraping off the rust from the bear-trap. In no time he had a good glittering bounty of gold. The rust powder he put in one of his surviving sacks. He tested the hinges on the bear trap. They were stubborn, but still operated. He double wrapped his hands in gauze and set the trap near the claw marks on the cabin wall outside. This, he covered in leaves.

\*

When the nose began to blacken, Peiterova told his wife that no man really needs a nose. Not really. And when he began to hide the blemish with a small cloth tied around the middle of his face, Elaine mocked him. She'd rip it away and say that she never married such a vain man.

Peiterova's nose was an anomaly. Lepers do not *lose* their noses. Not really. Some lose the linings of their noses so that they recede into the face. Peiterova had seen them, even before the leprosarium. It seemed there was a great deal about lepers that Peiterova did not know before he contracted the disease himself. The limbs did not just *fall away* like pine needles. Yet, his teeth fell out one by one. His nose blackened. Elaine heated a knife, sat her husband in a sitting chair, and removed it like nothing more than tender chicken that slips from the bone.

That was the first part.



The pinky was the second. Entirely Peiterova's fault. He had not been careful enough. What cut or abrasion caused the pinky on his right hand to grow decrepit he could not pinpoint. He hid it from her for days until his excuses for wearing gloves inside their apartment were utterly exhausted.

*My husband, she said, I will take another part of you, but let me keep it.*

He agreed. This time he could not feel a thing, only a slight gnawing. Elaine washed the wound. Wrapped it. The feeling in his hands, in his skin, it left so gradually that each touch became a ghost. She placed Peiterova's pinky in a small wooden box with a gold latch next to the bed. The night she cut off his pinky she slept with him in their own bed. Peiterova could not tell his wife's touch from his own.

In the quiet of the cabin, Po knew that numbness had its privileges. For example, he knew the temperature was dropping, he could smell it in the air, and it is likely that in as little as a month hypothermia would eat his body like fire. But, he never felt the *discomfort* of cold. He could relish a pleasant breeze to be immune to such discomforts. He was always like this, even as a child, even before he was an artist, a husband, a leper. On summer days he preferred to help his father sort through his butchery than be out enjoying the natural world. It is a strange thing he became a painter. *Dispassion* was the critique of his early work – paintings of tall soldiers and high banners. *Banal nationalism*. He seemed a man *removed*.

Po got a fire going and pulled at the cabbage, placing the leaves in a boiling pot. He took a small knife and cut at the kohlrabi in disjointed lumps. Some part of him thought this foolish. He could only really taste extremes. But there was something in the ritual. And he could still feel the warm stew from the inside. After putting a few whole leeks in the broth and cut up potatoes, Po sat down on the cabin floor and split the rotten squash open. He scooped out the

insides and picked out the seeds. He hadn't found a good spot to plant. Not yet. He'd have to do that tomorrow. The sun was already beginning to go down and the two trips to the river and back had exhausted him. His limbs stiffened (more than usual) and he didn't want to risk being outside, not with the cat out there, who'd easily tear him to shreds.

After the stew cooked he could use one of the pans to roast wood-chips. The chisel would come in handy. He'd have to let the fire continue through the night in order to get the wood to ash, then he'd mix some water and the squash and a bit of the rust powder and hopefully he'd have some paint by morning. The parchment he had brought had been ripped and shredded, but the dirty sheets were white enough. He could stretch them out, nail them to the wall, and get to work.

He poured himself some broth in a little wooden bowl very carefully. Even the burn from the water could cause his skin an infection. The cabbage soup warmed his insides and he felt engulfed in the sensation and, for nearly an hour, he simply gorged himself on hot vegetable water. Afterward, he did an inventory. Only a single head of cabbage was used and a few of the kohlrabi; most of the potatoes were gone, but he had more than enough food to last the week until the next delivery. He also did a personal inventory. Nine fingers. Twelve teeth. Ten toes. He removed most of his clothes and checked for bruises.

Po poked at the fire and fed it a few more logs. Before cooking the wood chips he would deal with the letters.

Each envelope had a beautiful red wax seal pressed in with a signet ring. The symbol was a simple "S" with a sword on either side. Po wondered if Elaine had been given her own signet ring, or if she had to go steal one, placing an official mark on the envelopes so no questions were asked about their delivery. He knew about the letters before the Franciscan had

revealed them. A nun told him at the leprosarium that the jailor was hoarding his correspondence, that they were from his wife, and that orders were given to keep them a secret. *It is a simple matter, maestro, the nun had said, I can easily bring them to you, you can read them, and I will simply return them afterward.* He had, of course, told the nun that he did not wish to see them. What good were the letters? What good were the reminders? He heard that his statue in Kresk had been smashed to pieces and those pieces were carried away on a wagon. Elaine posed kneeling for eight hours a day for that statue, and after it was finished they convinced her father that marriage to a respected artist like Peiterova Zyliksa brought more opportunities and fame than the arrangement that had been made to marry her off to some random lord with a cidery and many horses. Amid that wreckage, what good were letters?

He eyed the wax. It could be used as a binder. Or pigment. If mixed well, the wax may be able to give him red. There were twenty-six letters. She had written once a month, possibly. Maybe once a day, and then, when that got tiresome, once a week, and then month. He did not know. He took the small penknife in his possessions and scraped the wax away onto the table. Each envelope popped open revealing the rough parchment folded within. There were some that were written on both sides, and he looked away when Elaine's delicate script would peek out. Po could paint remembrances, one which made the Abbot of Gola cry, but none of his paintings were as powerful as the swirl and sinew of so many L's and E's. There was more memory in the loop of a Y than all the colors he could conjure.

After he removed the wax, Po stoked the fire. He tossed each letter separately into the flames. He gave each one their cremation and watched each fold get eaten, curl and become white soot. Then, he went about making paint.

\*

There were quiet days in the early stages of his leprosy that could be construed as a sort of *happiness*. Each day the joints in his fingers grew more and more stiff, and he had gone from painting portraits and landscapes to painting the sky. White clouds on blue. His skill had waned; he could no longer do the delicate work of painting the small buttons on a jacket, the wood grain on a desk, or the delicate light on strands of hair. And so, he grew out of favor. Nobles cared little for clouds. But, Peiterova still worked diligently filling his small apartment with blurry approximations of the heavens. Elaine would take his work out on the street each morning and come home with pennies and the two of them would eat a small dinner, listen to the street traffic, make jokes as the fire died.

*I sold every painting*, she would declare, happily. Then, as if her husband needed proof Elaine would empty out a little sack of coins on their dining room table. *Maybe not the bounty you're used to, maestro, but times are good and regular folk have coin to spend.*

*That is good*, the painter would grumble and the two of them would listen to the clip-clomp of passing horses. One could forgive him the stray thought that, in fact, no one cared to buy paintings of clouds and that these pennies, these small little sacks of coins that paid for their meager food and charlatan cream applied each night on Peiterova's increasingly stubborn joints, were not from his wife selling his work on the street. He could forgive himself having this thought, but he could not say it out loud each morning before his wife kissed him on the cheek and left with all his paintings wedged tightly under her arms. Instead, he tore this thought away and went to work.

Clouds were simple. They filled the sky with only a few strokes.

*Another productive day, my love.* The small pennies had turned to slips of silver. Who was paying silver for the sky? Elaine beamed a smile, loosed the ribbon in her black curly hair, and would ask what she should prepare for the evening meal. There was now a bounty of potatoes and leeks and onions. There were cuts of chicken. Eggs. She stocked the pantry. Peiterova held the silver in his chubby red fingers. He could not feel the cold of the metal.

*My wedding band has grown tight, he said. Can you remove it?*

*We can get it resized, she insisted.*

*No. It will not fit after a month. If it stays on my finger I could lose circulation. Then you'll have to cut the damn thing off. I think it is better removed. You can keep it.*

*I can put it on a chain, husband. You can wear it around your neck.*

*Yes, of course.*

Peiterova held his hand out and Elaine twisted the golden band left and right until it finally managed to get over the bump in his skin and slip off. She placed the ring in her apron pocket and promised to find a chain the next morning, when she went out to sell more paintings.

*Of course, my love, Peiterova said, of course.*

The money continued to flow in every afternoon. At some point, Peiterova could not easily manipulate his brush enough to even make clouds believable. His paintings turned into simple splotches of white and gray. They would all disappear, replaced in the evening by his tired wife and little slips of silver. Elaine would make dinner and run a bath. And in the quiet of the evening, as she wiped a rag across his back, Peiterova would try to recall the feeling of hot water running down his skin.

\*

The woodchips, by morning, had cooked down into a blackened soot. Po added water and some of the rotten squash and mixed it until it was a consistency he thought he could work with. The brushes he had brought up the mountainside had been untouched by the cat, only scattered. He divided the blackened charcoal paint up, added some of the rust powder to one of the black congealing dollops, but much to his dismay the powder did not mix well and only left gold and tin specks. The wax he melted and added water until it spread, almost like watercolor, across a little piece of parchment he had salvaged from the cat. He thought about other colors. He'd have to journey into the forests to find anything good. Flowers. Cocoons. Bark. He could use his urine and his feces, but he was not so desperate. Not yet. Making paint wasn't the issue, it was finding a surface that irked him. Po had settled on the dirty sheets, but he would need them, later, for warmth. He never knew how cold he actually was and, because of this, had always overcompensated, wearing three or more woolen blankets in the winter than needed. The blankets he brought were strewn in shreds across the forest floor. He'd have to speak with the vegetable carrier.

Po laid the sheet out on the floor and gripped a paintbrush. His fingers bent oddly. They were stiff and curled at the ends, so the act of gripping a brush was much more taxing than it had ever been when he was healthy. In fact, he had not actually held a paintbrush for several years. He tried to dip the end of the brush into the black charcoal paint, but found this task either too little or too much. Of course, it was more than just a matter of gripping the tool, he could not feel the brush in his hands, nor could he feel the slight pressure of the paint against the brush. When he finally put a few test strokes on the sheet he could tell that the charcoal

paint was too thick. It left uneven curdled swipes on the fabric. The waxen paint was too light and could barely be seen. The sheet itself was wrinkled and would upend the paint stubbornly, causing unwanted tributaries.

Po tossed the brush aside, frustrated. He could not even paint clouds now.

“And how will I hammer you into the wall?” he asked out loud.

He hobbled over to the ball-peen hammer and nails in the small wooden crate. This was more dangerous than risking evisceration by some forest predator. A slip of the hammer or the nail could result in losing a finger, and Po was proud of the nine he still had. He decided the best thing to do would be to hammer in the nails first and then tear holes in the sheet and hang it. He steadied the first nail.

*One. Two. One. Two. Tap lightly. Focus. Do not stray. One. Two.*

He knew he wouldn't really feel the reverberations from the hammer strokes, so he gave equal measure, and gripped the nail, dropped it, gripped it again, and breathed. Breathing was the key. Each breath would tell him when to pull back. He could feel his lungs expand in his chest. His insides still had their nerves intact. One. Breath. Two. Release. He knew he wouldn't feel if the nail pinched his fingers. Three strokes. He would give it three strokes and then let go of the nail. If it fell to the floor – four strokes. And if *he* didn't come off the wall, Po had more fingers to spare.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

The first nail stayed. Po examined his fingers. He waited for blood or bruise to form, but that was not the case. He repeated the process. Soon, the sheet was mounted to the wall, draped

over the table and the chair. He moved these closer to the door, carefully taking the glass vial the Franciscan had given him and placing it under his bed.

*How do you begin?* Elaine would ask Po this question when he was healthy and looking at a blank bit of stretched canvas.

He would point to the canvas and say that the images were there, buried, and that the act of painting was much like the act of excavation. Each touch of the brush unearthed something new.

Po tried to find images in the sheet.

The first thing he saw was his wife, naturally. She became a small little wrinkle that went the top of the sheet down, lightly curved, her naked back a small water stain. His test strokes, the black ones, were splotted in odd angles to the shadows of her hips, and where her feet lay the sheet was frayed, like small licks of fire. He could make out her bark-crushed olive skin. The deep scars that engulfed her back could easily bleed with the pestle guts of insects. This image melted into another; his father, where the length of the sheet was a crusted long line where cuts of meat laid, bloodied. In a graying swath, where the sheet was eaten away in little tears, was his bent head and wisps of hair. Behind him, hanging from hooks, could be the bloody innards of caught squirrels mixed well, transformed into the half-carcasses of butchered pigs. And Po? Where was he in this sheet? The grass stain (at least, he hoped it was a grass stain) that sat bright and unremarkable at the edge of these soiled remembrances.

*You aren't there. You never were there. You never were.*



He took one of his brushes and dipped it into the watery red of the wax paint. In an arcing motion the brush ran across the top of the sheet, but the paint was too thin, and only left small pinkish spots where the sheet absorbed the water. He placed the paint down, frustrated.

It was getting late in the afternoon and he had to get water. He wrapped himself in gauze.

\*

*You cannot hold on to these things. Just as your body is finite, especially your body that can fall away so easily, you cannot hold onto the things that defined you before the disease. Tear away the parts. I have done this. Why should I linger on the memory of a child or a wife or a religion or the feeling of happiness or rage? Learn that you are numb.*

“I do not believe you can forget everything.”

*No. You will find in the quiet moments where you are imprisoned by thoughts you cannot forget everything. But what good is it? That life is not coming back.*

“And how do you forget, wise old leper?”

*You convince yourself by repetition. You lie to yourself until your lies carry more weight than the truth. I would not tell you about myself, Maestro. You know little of me, besides these nightly walks in this prison, and I would never tell you my real name or who I was when I was well, but I may tell you a story, a story about another man.*

“And that would be the truth?”

*No. That would be version of me, a part of me that I have detached. So I would say, ‘There is a story I know of an old general who had six daughters and a fat nagging wife and a*

*mistress who turned out to be an awful seamstress,' and so on and so on. You tell the stories of your life long enough like this, in separate parts, until they become convincing folklore. Deep down, you always remember, but day by day you will find that these stories have performed an exorcism on your thoughts. You will discover, after some time, the idea of running headlong into the guards asking them to cut you down and release you from this existence is foolish. It is foolish because the past is no longer your prison.*

*"I am not convinced."*

*You never seem to be. I will show you. Tell me a story.*

*"From my life?"*

*No. Not from your life, Maestro. Tell me a story about a painter. Perhaps a painter as a young man. You understand?*

*"Yes. I understand."*

*Then go on.*

*"I knew a painter, a young painter, who told me of the foolish time he married too young. His father was a butcher and his mother was a prostitute and he had no good sense. Perhaps it was the cruel tutelage of his upbringing, the ruddy often dripping fingers of his father that found no difference between cutting flesh and raising flesh that made the painter foolish. As a boy he would gather the blood and muscle from his father's butchery and finger-paint on whatever surface he could find – panes of glass, the trunks of trees, the flanks of livestock piled in the back of his father's shop."*

*What did he paint?*

“Childish things, at first. Animals and old heroes from mythology. But as he got older he painted the bent figure of his father and his cleavers. The ears of pigs hung from a string. Jawbones. The sinews of bisected goat legs. The split skull of a cow ready for brain removal. He was equally fascinated and disgusted by his father’s trade. It was in this time, when he was about thirteen, that the painter went out trying to find new surfaces to paint on, out of the watchful gaze of his father, that he met a girl. And he painted her. She was the first *subject* of his bloody medium. And I suppose, it was easy then to fall in love with something he did not entirely understand. He remembered the small trails of red he left on her cheeks. She rubbed them into her skin to make them look rosy, alive, which fascinated him. They ran off and found a priest willing to marry them. They were both thirteen. Poor. It mattered little – there was no dowry, there were no titles or land to be lost or gained. And for six days they were happy and blissfully together. Strange that a ceremony like *marriage* could make one feel safe and hopeful and secure – but as I said, the boy was foolish.”

*And what happened to them?*

“She was struck down by a horse in the street. And that was the story of them.”

*I see. And Maestro, do you feel it leaving your body? Your thoughts?*

“No. I do not.”

*Tell it again. Tell it again to me. Go over it again and again until it is blank.*

\*

On Po’s second trip from the river he saw four men standing outside his cabin. They looked like travelers, rough, short bearded, with long coats and hard leather boots. They carried weapons. Hatchets. One of them had a net and small little snares were bandoliered around his

body like miniature nooses. The fourth man stayed a small distance away from his companions, nearer a horse. He wore a tri-cornered hat and looked older than the others by nearly twenty years. Grey spindles chandeliered his small head and, unlike the others, he wore a suit, well pressed, well hemmed, the kind Po wore years ago for patrons. The horse was laden with camping gear, and along its flank in netting were the bodies of three wolves.

Po stood silently at the edge of the wood, watching. The three younger men passed around a pipe and laughed. Every so often, the older man would pull a small notebook from a jacket pocket and jot something down with a nub of charcoal. Po felt suddenly exposed. Fearful. He placed his bucket of water down on the forest floor and attempted to go back to the river and wait, but before he could turn away he heard one of the hunters shout out.

“Hullo, sir!”

Po did an about face and came out of the forest. He uncovered his mouth.

“I am a leper,” he announced.

The three men shot glances at the older man who did not move. One of the hunters, the one who had spoken, walked tentatively toward Po. “My name is Tavish,” he said, “And these are my companions, Wysli and Lurtz. We are hunters and are looking for something extraordinary. A black cat. Twice the size of a man. Rumor has it the creature has taken refuge on this mountain.”

Po hobbled forward and coughed. This caused Tavish to stop in mid stride. Wysli and Lurtz came up behind their friend. It was then that Po could see that Lurtz, the man with the traps, also had a broad pistol whose barrel went down the length of his leg. He bent the hammer back and pushed it down again in quick, successive beats like a nervous twitch.

*Click-Thud. Click-Thud.*

“How did such a creature find its way here?” Po asked, keeping his eyes on the fourth man who stayed near the horse.

“Our employer,” Tavish began, “A man of good repute, owns a traveling menagerie. This cat was part of that exhibition and recently broke free. We have been hired to capture the animal and bring it back.”

Wysli, who was short and squat and ugly compared to his companions, smiled revealing a set of brown teeth, “It is rare. From the Dark Continent. Such creatures there would give you nightmares. They say half-men live in the bush and eat the brains of Europeans who dare wander those dark jungles.”

Tavish sighed, “Forgive my companion. He has a wild imagination.”

*Click-Thud.*

“Have you seen the cat, sir?”

*Click-Thud.*

“Yes,” Po said, “I saw him a day ago. Near the river on the opposite bank. The creature raided my things.”

The three men exchanged glances. Po saw the silent one near the horse staring now directly at him as if he was working something out in his head. He pulled out his notebook and flipped to a page and studied it. Po could see a ring on his right index finger.

“Which direction is the river?” Wysli asked.

“Very near. A quarter mile west of here,” Po coughed and pointed toward the cabin, “I can offer you a place to stay, though the accommodations are lacking.”

“No, no,” Tavish said quickly, “We must be off. You have been much help, sir. If we manage to capture the beast we will drop by and let you know,” Tavish motioned for his companions to follow him toward the tree line. Each one bowed in respect. The fourth man took the reins of the mule and directed the animal away. He tipped his tri-cornered hat to Po, lingered just a moment at the edge of the trees, and then disappeared.

\*

Po had not put another stroke of paint on the sheet. It was late, now. The dying light cast shadows on the wrinkles of the cloth turning what little color there was into strange facsimiles of light. The unexpected arrival of the four men made the artist hesitate. He ripped the sheet from the wall, bundled it up, and shoved it under his bed. He took the paints and threw them into the fire. The brushes he rolled in a ripped burlap sack and placed in the wood-working crate and covered them. He checked the cabin for anything that would be a clue to Peiterova, to his identity.

He sat on the bed and wondered. Had they been too loud in the village? The arrival of the Soldier and the Franciscan and the leper was met with outrage. If there were men after Po and they were in the village, they need only follow. Tavish had said they were hunting the cat, and that could not have been a lie, but if they should have met with someone prior, the older man, the three of them seemed the type to go along with any ill thing. Po reached under the bed and pulled out the vial of opium wrapped in a sack. How strong was it? He could mix it with

something. But what would be the point of that? It didn't matter how strong it was, he need only drink the entire thing and then...

Three loud knocks rapped against the roped door, making it clatter each time. Po quickly hid the vial and picked up the gauze on the floor. He wrapped his face, hurriedly. Another set of knocks.

"Good sir, I have come to take you up on the shelter you offered my companions," said a voice.

One of the hunters.

"A moment," Po stuttered. He grabbed his walking stick against the wall beside the door and slowly unfastened the ropes. When he opened it there stood the man in the tri-cornered hat and fine vestments. Po saw that his boots were muddied and his pant legs looked wet.

"Thank you, sir," the man gestured toward the cabin inviting himself in. Po moved aside.

"Please, come sit by the fire," Po started for the chair by the table, but the man stopped him and moved the chair instead.

"I've got that," the man smiled, "You need not worry yourself. My name is Aaron. The four of us have been out by the river all day, but the beast has yet to show itself. I told my eager companions that hunting a vicious black cat in the dead of the night was more suicide than sport, but they shooed me away. I remembered what you said, about needing company, and I have grown desirous of more fruitful conversation than what my company can provide me."

"Of course," Po moved to the fire and hoisted up the cooking cauldron, "I can stew some vegetables if you would like."

“How about tea?” Aaron produced a small kerchief and unfolded it to reveal a blackened lump of tea leaves, “I have not had the opportunity on the road to brew any. I can’t think of a better time to do so.”

Po looked enviously at the tea-leaves. Tea was not something he had often, not since his self-imposed exile in Gola when the disease first started to affect him. He also knew, even though his sense of taste had dulled, the tea might allow a tiny amount of pleasure and cut through the numbness. He put a small amount of water into a pot and placed it over the fire.

Aaron removed his hat and revealed a bald head, save a ring of stringy white hairs around the top that dangled around his ears and against his forehead. He undid his jacket and wore a white shirt with silver buttons. He seemed calm and collected. He stared at the cabin and took everything in as if he had just arrived at the home of a dignitary.

“You seem to have a meager amount of possessions,” he stated, “How long have you lived here?”

“Many years now,” Po lied, “Many years. I do not require much. I am provided vegetables from the village. They are kind to me.”

Aaron nodded. “I must say, I do not meet many lepers. They are sequestered away in most cases. Rumors abound that they are being killed, now, like in other Christian countries,” he held up his hand, “I do not mean to frighten you. That is something I simply heard.”

“I have heard the same,” Po let the pot settle and went over to the bed and sat down, “Much like witches. They burn witches in Denmark. In England.”



“Yes, I have seen them burn. Grisly sight. I have found that those being burned have done no witchcraft but upset the wrong person. But it is hard to convince those who are convinced, hm?”

Po felt the top of the blanket and let his hand rest on the protruding glass vial underneath, “What is it you do, if I may ask? You do not strike me as a hunter.”

“I am a representative of the person who owns that black cat. He owns many beautiful creatures. There’s one that is striped from its head its toe and is three times the size of a normal man. There’s a lizard with frills that on the side of its head that can walk on water. Of course, we tell the people it can walk on water, I have never seen it myself. The black cat, they call it Timon, broke free when two men were feeding it, though they insist the animal stays within its cage, it still somehow escaped. It left the two men handling it badly wounded. It is important we retrieve the creature should it cause any more harm. I would suggest staying in your cabin if you can.”

“I am sure your companions are more than capable of killing it,” Po said.

“Can I ask you a question,” Aaron asked.

“Yes,” Po got up to check the water, leaning on his staff.

“Is it all numb? Your body? I have heard that lepers are numb everywhere. Even on the inside.”

“I cannot touch things. I cannot feel them. But I do feel on the inside. I am looking forward to the tea. The warmth. I cannot see well. Not during the night. I can smell, but not well, I have no nose.”

“I’d like to see that,” Aaron said. “Would you unwrap your face, sir?”

“No,” Po stated, turning his attention the water, “I am not part of a menagerie.”

“I apologize. My curiosity got the better on me. Here is the tea. I hope it warms you,” Aaron handed Po the bundle of tea-leaves and rose from the chair. He looked over the cabin, again. He studied the table. Ran his finger down part of the wood.

“I know a story about a leper, if you’ll indulge me,” Aaron said.

“Of course,” Po placed the tea-leaves in the water and stared at his hand gripping the staff where the vial of liquid was hidden.

“Leprosy afflicts the poor and wealthy alike,” Aaron started, “Indiscriminate. And this one leper, I don’t recall his name, Peter maybe. Peter was an artist, yes? I have never had an eye for the art world. I find one painting usually just as pleasant as the next, but this man was well liked, his paintings were loved by nobles and men of high station. I imagine if he had lived a little longer he would have been a cultural treasure, but alas, the disease robbed him of any real fame. That’s sad. But that’s not the saddest part. This artist had a wife. She was beautiful. And dutiful. When Peter’s body began to grow sore and stiff she would carry him to bed. She would wash him. Even as they grew destitute, she never left his side. Such is true love. There was a nobleman who would watch this woman try to ply trade, try to sell what she could so the artist could eat, so she could afford phony remedies, and it broke the noble’s heart to see such a delicate flower wilt with so much heavy, burdensome love. He told the artist’s wife that she need not want if she simply lived with him and that her husband would be taken care of – he would be brought to a place and cared for by those learned about the disease. The wife refused. Still, the noble, feeling sorry for her, gave her money. Every week he gave her enough money to provide for her husband. But every once in a while he would ask,” Aaron turned toward Po who was mixing the tea and listening, attentively, “*Will you live with me? Will you finally be mine? I*

*will care for your husband, you need only live with me. For you are so lovely. I cannot see you grieve as your husband becomes merely pieces.* And still, the wife refused. Can you imagine? The frustration that noble must have felt? That someone would forgo a life of extravagance for some impoverished sick artist? It must have infuriated him. It wasn't long, though, that this noble's station rose and he had more sway in how things operated in the land. He wrote a decree that all the lepers should be collected and sent to a prison, away from the public. When they came for Peter, the wife attacked them with a knife, such was her devotion," Aaron sat back down on the chair.

Po looked away, back at the cauldron. He watched the tea-leaves bob in the steaming water.

"They raped her, of course. Can you imagine being that man, being Peter, unable to move? Stiff. Knowing even if you tried to help your wife that you'd be helpless."

"The tea is ready," Po poured the boiling tea into two small wooden cups. He didn't feel the scalding water pour down his right hand. He let out a string of coughs. Aaron jumped out of the chair and paced along the length of the cabin.

"I am sorry, sir," Aaron said, "Your ailment is frightening."

"I do not take offense," Po sat down next to the fire, his knees barely bending. He blew on the tea and nodded at Aaron, "Please, finish your story."

Aaron grabbed the other small bowl and looked at the tea. He lifted the bowl up to his lips, hesitated, and then took a sip.

"Peter was taken away," he continued, "What's worse, is that he must have known something. He must have known that the noble hated him. His wife must have said something.

So, there he was, and there were all these lepers in that prison and Peter, poor man, knowing he was the singular reason they were all rounded up and put in there in the first place. Because he had a beautiful wife and men are fickle. But what he didn't know, or maybe he did, was the wife eventually went to the noble and asked for forgiveness. After all that. After stealing away her love. After being raped. She asked this man to forgive *her*. And he did. But she could never see her husband again. And she had to live with the noble. And you'd think, well, I guess everything worked out – for the noble, at least. No. That woman was never the same. She would write letters and send them stealthily in the night. She would call out Peter's name. And while, eventually, the woman did grow to care for the noble in some respects, the noble knew he could not eclipse her first husband. So, he fabricated a tale that Peter had died in that prison. And you know what happened next?"

Po shook his head.

"Like the lighting of a candle, the woman married the noble. They were happy. She bore him children. So, is all that pain gone? Does the tremors of that pain leave when the source is destroyed?"

"I don't know," Po whispered into his tea.

"Ah! Yes, I don't think the noble knew either," Aaron downed the rest of his tea and placed the empty bowl on the floor, "And he eventually began to suspect that the wife knew Peter's death was a lie."

Aaron rose from the chair and looked toward the door, the back at Po.

"Are you Peiterova Zyliksa?"

"No," Po said. "I do not know that name."

The man reached for his hat and placed it on his head. He went back to the table. Po slowly got up and inched toward his bed. He gripped the wooden bowl sloshing with tea. Aaron reached down underneath the table and picked up something from the floor. From just outside the door Po hear a noise...

*Click.*

"This is a wax seal," Aaron held up a bit of red wax that Po had scraped the day before, "I believe it bears the mark of Slovbank, unless I am mistaken. Are you receiving correspondence from Slovbank, Po?"

"What good is this?"

"I know, seeing your condition, you are not an expert on pain," Aaron moved forward and let the wax fall back to the floor, "But my employer is in such a distraught fit of pain," he pointed to his heart, "Right. Here. That muscle does not dull. I am sure that you are Peiterova Zyliska, but even if you are not, when I bring your head to that noble's house who could tell you from any other pock-marked leper?"

"Elaine will know. She will see her husband and then the murderer she married," Po said, "Bring my hand," Po raised his left hand up, "A part much like others, but she knows these hands. I sculpted her with these hands. She will see me in them. And you will have your death and I will have my life."

Aaron shook his head in disbelief. His eyes darted toward the door and then he moved forward, producing a long, curved knife from his belt. He shook his head.

"No," he said, "It is not enough."

Po stumbled backward until his back hit the wall.

“I sent the Franciscan who accompanied me here to tell my wife I died in the leprosarium. You say yourself that they are burning bodies of lepers, and so it would not be so false. She would believe it.”

“I imagine she would,” Aaron stated, “Except I killed that man and the soldier. They told me where you were before I did so.”

Aaron reached the bed. Po swallowed a bit of bile in his throat.

“The disease,” he uttered. “If you should wound me in such a vicious fashion, gut me, my blood will turn you to rot. There is hemlock in the forest, near the river, gather it and I can turn it into a poison and you would not risk being afflicted.”

The assassin stopped in his tracks.

“Hemlock?”

“Yes,” Po said quickly, “White flowers that grow near the bank. You did see them, did you not?”

“I saw no flowers,” Aaron said.

“They are there,” Po pleaded, “And I know how to extract the poisons from them. We will need a lot of it. Please. Cutting me open would expose you to the disease. Please, sir. I am a coward. I do not wish to be cut open. I cannot die like that.”

Aaron backed away and sheathed his knife. He called out. Lurtz entered the cabin with his long pistol and gave Po a wary eye.

“I am going to river,” Aaron stated, “Watch this man. If he tries to leave, shoot him.”

“As you say,” Lurtz replied, “Wysli is out back. Should he come to?”

“Shut up,” Aaron rasped, “Just watch him. I will return within the hour.”

Aaron put on his jacket and rushed out the door. The gangly thug in rough leathers sat down in the chair by the fire and pulled a long sliver of wood from his pocket to pick his yellowed teeth. Po sat down on the bed, sipped his cooling tea and waited.

\*

It was *only* waiting. Peiterova sat at the edge of their bed and had waited for Elaine to emerge from the small alcove of their wedding suite while little bits of candlelight floated around her father’s silver – plates of charred chicken, potatoes, a pitcher of wine, delicate forks, knives, spoons – he followed the small reflections of fire in each silvered mirror. Before this night, Peiterova had waited for Elaine’s father to finally put to rest any doubts that this artist from Gola was more of a prize than some broad-shouldered youngest son with horses and apple orchards. On the bed, Peiterova was still clothed. He heard water being drawn from a basin. His new wife was washing. He decided to remove his boots, but not his stockings, and begin a slow descent of unfastening the first few buttons on his shirt. And he waited.

“Husband?” he heard her call from the hall.

“Yes?” he mumbled, nervously. He shot over to the table with the silver plates and shoved a sprig of mint in his mouth and chewed. He heard the sound of people shouting, drinking, and singing from below.

“The ceremony was quick, wasn’t it?”

“Very,” Peiterova gagged as he swallowed the mint. He rasped a few breaths and poured himself a glass of wine. It was in the waiting that he found his wife. They had shared a glass of wine months prior in a small church. He asked for all the women in the village to come

to the artist, to him, and he awaited the perfect model. Young girls giggled as the artist, Peiterova, walked the length of the pews examining the small, delicate features of each offering. He took in each part. Not the eyes. Nor the creaminess of the skin. These would come naturally to the marble. No, the artist looked for the sallowness of the cheeks where small shadows could lay like crescents on a hungry face. The nostrils that swung out and in, imperfect, fragile where the artist could breathe life. The ears must not be hidden because the viewer often marveled that the maze could be recreated without the touch of God.

Elaine came out of the candlelight alcove, into the wedding suite, in nothing but an open dressing gown, olive skin, tresses of black hair that went down to the middle of her scarred and burned back. Water still dripped down her belly, onto her legs, where the small droplets found the wounds of her conflagration. She smiled and Peiterova felt tears well up in his eyes.

In the church Elaine came bearing wine in a silver pitcher, the same one on their wedding night, and poured the tired artist a healthy amount. It was not her outward beauty that decided things for Peiterova, that Elaine would be Madonna, it was the hint of scars underneath the kerchief around her neck. Halfway through the wine he asked her, *will you model for me?* She told him no. She was nineteen then. She would be twenty on their wedding night. She would be twenty-eight when the disease started to take hold.

“What was it that you told me the first day I modeled for you, husband?” Elaine said upon emerging into the remains of their finished meal and neatly made blankets, on their wedding night.

“I said you have an imperfect lower lip. It is thin and does not hold color. And if I mold you with a fuller lip, it is not because it is a more perfect version of yourself, but a less perfect version of the Mother of Christ.”



“You, husband,” Elaine sauntered toward a bit of blackened chicken and picked at the skin, “You told me I had the posture of a two-legged donkey.”

Elaine took a sliver of white meat and dipped it into a half cup of red wine. She let it rest on her tongue, swallowed, and then licked the grease from her fingers. Then, in one fluid motion, she took a black ribbon from the dining table and tied her hair up until the curls were contained in a single plume. She extended her hands out toward Peiterova beckoning him to come closer.

Ten years after their wedding night, Elaine laced her fingers through her husband’s and kneeled down on the floor. He had mixed water and vinegar in a small bowl. He could no longer move the pinky on his right hand. *Heat a knife*, he told her.

Peiterova, in the wedding suite, let his hands slide up his wife’s hips, then he touched the tips of his fingers on the small of her back. She pressed her body against his still buttoned shirt and Peiterova felt the water on her chest soak through the silk. She took her hands and gripped his arms and moved his up until they felt the bumps and sinews of the burns on her back. His fingertips softly unearthed that untouched maze.

Elaine, in the quiet of their apartment, poked the blackened finger with the knife. It was the first to touch her burns. She still had the *pain*, even if her husband did not. *I will not feel the cut, my wife*. He placed his hand on her’s and pushed, lightly at first, and then as he tried to remember what the sensation of pressure felt like on his skin, the knife began to hiss and the smell of burned flesh attacked his nostrils. After the pinky was gone Peiterova stared at the remains in a bowl. It had curled, become like a worm split open so that the fleshy white pus was laid out in soft black blood. He did not believe it was him any longer. And then, he did not

believe that the finger had ever been him. Elaine washed the wound in the water and the vinegar.

In the wedding suite Elaine moved past her husband and dropped onto the bed. She opened her sleeping gown. This was the second time he had seen his wife naked. He did not know then if it was the disposition of an artist to quickly find imperfections. The majority of the burns were on Elaine's back, but the scarring came about the neck like a mangled necklace that unfolded to the tops of her breasts. These were nearly unblemished, though one was smaller than the other, and on the larger was a smear of pimples above the areola. Elaine was thin, but her stomach still sagged ever slightly and three moles peaked across her side. Between her legs black hair blossomed. The olive skin of her legs was striped with dark scars that went almost down to her ankles. The front of her left foot was mangled and looked like the finely chopped meat in his father's butcher shop. The right was smooth. Peiterova thought she seemed like a piece of a mythology.

Their hands moved across each other's skin finding long neglected parts that caused them to shiver and jolt. They became intertwined. The sheen of the silver warped their naked bodies while drinking songs carried up from the party below. Elaine moved his hands and smiled, laughed. She kissed his eyelids. His ears. The tips of every finger and every toe. His nose.

He painted his nose yellow so Elaine would know where to cut. He directed her hand holding the knife and emotionlessly imparted, *here, and here, and careful along the ridge*, the same way his father had talked when teaching him to butcher pigs. Elaine wordlessly heated the knife and climbed onto her husband's lap. Peiterova saw his silver wedding band dangling from a string around her neck.

In the wedding suite, lying naked in the bed, they picked out images in the swirling plaster of the ceiling and waited.

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“Has it been within the hour?” Lurtz asked Po. The two had been sitting for ages, but Aaron had not yet returned. The skinny man looked to be growing restless. He ate six of Po’s carrots and was eyeing a few potatoes. Truth was, it had been nearly an hour, the tea had grown cold, and Po was still sitting on the bed, unmoving. Lurtz talked. Not about anything in particular, mostly about women, the look in their eyes, which ones were simpler and which ones he stayed away from. He had a fondness for peasant girls, the poorer the better, because they would do anything for a few pennies. He asked Po incessant and increasingly lude questions. Po figured he did not have a mind for anything else.

*Can you still get a rise, leper?*

*Has it rotted off? I bet a lucky lass could find some use for portable pecker!*

*You can’t taste the cunny?*

It went on like this. Question after question. Po mumbled dead responses. And when there was air between the two it was *click. Thud. Click. Thud. Click. Thud.* Lurtz finally went to the cauldron and started filling it with the remainder of the water. The hunger most likely getting the better of him.

“How about some stew, leper?” he asked.

Po rose from the bed. Lurtz shot up and trained his pistol on his captive.

“Aaron is not coming back,” Po told him, “He is dead by now. Or unmoving.”

“Shut up!” Lurtz shouted, “Sit down!”

“I gave him half a bottle of opium,” Po continued, limping toward Lurtz, “And I still have the other half.”

Po produced the half vial of opium from the tatters of his clothing. Lurtz shakily pointed his gun at Po’s chest. The leper did not stop his slow march forward. The thug went toward the door, still fixing his weapon on Po, and shouted, *Wysli! Wysli!*

“This amount will kill me,” Po said nodding to the vial, “And I will take it. I will take it now. And you can watch me die. You can bring my body back to the Lord of Slovbark. He will pay you handsomely. More than you will get for the cat, I am sure.”

“How much?”

“He is rich. He has a mansion with many rooms. Servants. Horses. I am sure it will be a good ransom, my friend. Who knows? Perhaps he will be your patron and you will have good meals and a steady amount of coin for your work. Women.”

“Cultured women?” Lurtz said with disgust.

“Or whores,” Po corrected, “Nobles know the right ones. The clean ones. Hm? A standing room at the whorehouse for Lurtz.”

“Forget the opium!” the man shook his head vigorously, “That amount would not kill you. You’d only play dead and run off in the night. I think I will kill you now and make it a sure thing.”

At that moment there came a scream of pain from the side of the cabin. Lurtz shoved his barrel into Po's chest pushing him backwards and onto the cabin floor. The screaming continued, pathetic wailing and crying. Lurtz bobbed his head between the door and his meal-ticket. Then, with lightening speed the hunter went to the door, undid the rope which latched it, and then pulled Po toward the table against the window. In three quick movements both of Po's hands were tied to the leg of the table and Lurtz quickly left with pistol in hand, readied.

Po heard the gun go off and then a sharp scream. Something lurched into the side of the cabin causing small bits of dust and detritus to lilt down. Then, quiet. Po tugged at the ropes, but the knots were too tight. He could reach them with his mouth, but he was likely to lose more teeth than loose his hands. He yanked at the table. It didn't budge. Desperately looking around, he saw the wood-working crate he had covered in canvas. He would need to move the table, only a few feet, then he could lay down and try to pull the crate toward him with his feet. He shoved the table, this time using his whole body. It creaked just a few inches. He heard the door open and smelled gunpowder.

It was the cat, black as night. Its face was still plastered with Po's pigments casting a rainbow along its snout and below its yellow eyes. He saw the chain broken around its neck and as the cat lurched forward it scraped against the wood. It bared bloodied teeth, and Po saw now that it was bleeding, heavily, from a wound across its side. It slipped and fell. It tried to rise, but its back leg twisted in the growing pool of blood and the weight of the animal crashed against the cabin floor.

Po turned back to the crate and pivoted the table toward it. He shoved his unfeeling legs at the wooden box and tried kicking it a few times. On the fourth try it tipped over. He saw his brushes spill out, along with the calipers, the chisels, and the handle of the rusted saw. Po

extended his legs again and tried to judge the distance. He wouldn't feel the handle of the saw. He had to guess. The sounds the cat made were unworldly, a deep yawning desperation. Po tried to ignore it and concentrate. He managed to get his foot into the handle of the saw and pull it toward him.

Luckily, the rope was old. Maybe as old as the cabin. It cut easily and when Po felt it give way he jumped up to his feet. He carefully walked around the cat and its wheezing breaths. Outside he saw Lurtz's body splayed out on the steps of the cabin, face down. Beyond that, he couldn't see, it was late and his eyes could not handle the darkness. He found the cabin wall and followed it to the side and nearly tripped over something. Leaning down Wysli's body came into focus. He had been caught in the bear-trap. Part of his face had been clawed away. Po quickly patted the man down and found a hatchet tucked into the hunter's belt. He held the weapon against his body like a crucifix. Then, being carried by the wind, a voice came calling from the forest. It was long and drawn out. Po went back to the cabin.

The cat had moved a few inches, but still remained bloody on the cabin floor. It wheezed and snorted as Po dug out a candle from his things and dipped the wick in the fire. The candle gave enough light for Po to notice trees before he stumbled into them. He did not have his walking stick, but the candle in one hand and the hatchet in the other. It was cold. He could tell. The whistle of the wind and the discoloration of the bark told him that he should not linger too long. He could not hear the night birds. He could not hear insects. What he could hear was the steady call of someone's voice in the darkness.

Halfway to the river he saw Aaron sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree. His hat was a few meters away, upended. In his lap was a bouquet of small white flowers. Lilacs. The man looked up at the candlelight and at Po. His left hand went to his belt and he slowly pulled

out the long dagger. He slashed at the air like fighting phantoms and then tossed the blade aside.

“I feel numb,” he said.

Po looked around, nervously. Where was Tavish? Where was the fourth man? Perhaps the black cat had killed him as well. Or perhaps he was standing just out of sight ready to strike. Po inched his way toward Aaron and kicked the blade away. He went through his pockets and found a bundle of tobacco in a fine white cloth, a small snuff box, a journal and an opened envelope. Po placed these items in the folds of his tattered robes.

“I feel numb,” Arron repeated.

Po leaned down and adjusted the lilacs, placing Aaron’s hands around them. He removed the man’s boots and put them on his own feet. He took the hat to Aaron’s head, kneeled, and said a prayer. Then he gripped the hatchet and went to work.

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Po could not drag the bodies. Not in the night, not after so much had happened, and so they would have to remain on his doorstep until morning. Perhaps if Tavish did show up and see the bodies of his friends he’d cut his losses and run away. The cat was still alive, but not a threat. The animal had drenched the floorboards with blood.

Po whispered the cat’s name, “Timon.”

He placed the bloody hatchet on the table and the other effects he had taken from Aaron he put under the bed. He tied the door closed with what remained of the rope, and then sat on the bed exhausted and watched the cat struggle to breath. The growl and snarl had turned to a whimper, a faint whistle through the nose and teeth. Po sighed heavily and retrieved the opium that had rattled against one of the walls during the commotion. He uncorked the bottle and laid his body down on the bloody floor next to the cat's head. The cat was too weak to fight back and let the artist pull open its mouth. Po shook the opium down into the cat's throat and tossed the now empty bottle across the floor.

The two of them laid there for a while. Eventually, the cat's painful whimpering subsided. He ran his gnarled hand through the cat's black fur. Its last breath in the early morning was not some great exhalation. It was a decent. And then nothing.

## **Part 2**

Green is what Po had, always, in great heaps that he could not easily manipulate. It was due to his diet. Broccoli. Spinach. Kohlrabi. He did not care for these, and so he always ate them last, and if there was a surplus they were immediately pestled and mixed with a binder – milk curds or vegetable oils – until he had rotted heaps of green pigment on the small wooden table laid out on bits of cut wood that he used for a palette. Even as he stared at the sheet, where the



crude form of a woman on fire was lumped in great red and black swaths, he saw where the tips of the flames couldn't help but be mixed with green. He planned to paint over it. He was tired of the image.

Beneath the woman were his other attempts. These emerged from the side of her blackened body like the haphazard pieces of a dream upon waking. Po saw wayward limbs. Bits of abstract geometry that made up some larger picture now occluded. It reminded him of insects caught in a spider's web. He could not remember all of them. He decided that, while his fingers still worked, he would paint the Madonna over the immolation.

"It will have to be a green Madonna," he rasped to himself. "Immaculately verdant."

He had forgone brushes years ago. They were now useless baubles that rattled under his bed and in-between the wooden floorboards of the cabin. Instead, he placed his forefingers into the thick, vegetable pigment and began putting down the demure, vase-like outline of Mary on the sheet. His fingers lacked the precision of a brush, but he found that he could at least create vague impressions of the world with the bits of him that were still intact. He did not remember his old life, not really, the important parts sometimes snuck up on him while he laid down a new layer on the sheet, and in this way the very act of painting had changed. He was not painting for a patron. He was not creating some contracted work for a burgomaster's hall. These painting sessions were purely for Po. Never had he felt the importance of his work until now, when parts of him were beginning to fade away, and in color late at night some spirit of him would lay in shadow on that pinioned sheet, like bits of landscape before the sun plunged down behind the mountain.

Quickly, the woman aflame was covered in broccoli green and he saw his wife kneeling in prayer. He tried to keep the image as long as he could. He listed her parts...

Black curly cascading hair.

Emerald eyes, one narrower than the other.

A bump in the ridge of the nose.

...and then she would be gone again. And Po would paint as if some shamanistic ritual would bring her back. This would go on for days. Each new layer he hoped would excavate something more concrete. But as the years had dragged on he was left with only the ritual and the hope for ghosts in the pigment.

Ovi walked in the cabin and placed his load of vegetables on the dark stain on the floor. Po turned away from his exorcism and wiped his hands on his old robes that had been streaked out of recognition with so many colors that Ovi playfully called the painter Joseph. Po grumbled at the apparent bounty of more broccoli and cauliflower.

“I caught you painting, then?” Ovi said.

“I was putting down a new layer,” Po said.

“I can get you parchment, maestro.”

Po shook his head and pulled at the load of food. The vegetable carrier helped him sort the bounty on the table. Ovi had taken over his father’s duties of carrying food to the leper. A duty that was probably happily given up, seeing as Ovi’s father had not once asked Po a question or said more than, *please stay in the cabin*. When Ovi first began the deliveries he was surprised when the young man knocked on the cabin door and insisted on introducing himself. For five years Ovi had dutifully arrived and, though Po was not immediately forthcoming, the two had formed an acquaintanceship that the painter could not ignore.

“Did you bring fish this time?” Po asked as it became increasingly clear that he had not.

“No, I’m sorry. But you can’t taste anyway.”

“I was promised fish. *That* I remember. And I can count on one hand how many times I’ve been delivered fish, which is pitiful given I don’t have as many fingers as you do on one hand.”

“I will redouble my efforts, but the river has been fished. I brought you salt. You can still taste salt, right?”

“Yes. Yes. I can’t wait to taste my salted broccoli.”

“Do you want me to check you for sores now? Or after our game?”

“I’m fine. I’m not worried about sores. I’m worried about my weight.”

“Po,” Ovi showed the painter his rough worked hand before he placed it on Po’s shoulder, “I will get you fish. I promise. Maybe even chicken. Let me check your body for sores.”

Po relented. Ovi had become something of an expert in the affliction. He checked for sores because Po didn’t move enough. The sores could become infected. He *was* moving less. It took all his effort to draw up water from the boat house. Po had fallen once between the river and cabin and would have died if Ovi had not arrived just in time and carried Po home.

He removed his robes and he could tell immediately that Ovi was also worried about the painter’s weight. The leprosy had a way of making parts of Po’s body bulge in deceptive ways, and along his chest and his legs and parts of his back the skin had discolored in dark almost blackened shapes. Po never liked the look of the flesh. It was strange topography. It had been some time since he had removed his clothing and even Po was surprised by how concave his

stomach had become, the bones of his legs and pelvis thinly encased in the skin that looked like unleavened bread. Po was not embarrassed. At some point he may have been, a long time ago, but he could not feel Ovi's fingers as they crept over his ankles and elbows. He remembered disowning his own pinky. That memory still burned. As Ovi's hands looked for sores Po found no connection with his skin. It had become just as dead as his buried finger.

After the examination Ovi set up the chessboard and went over the rules again for Po's sake. They had played many times, but Po always forgot how each piece moved. Take pieces. Remove them. Trap your opponent until they can no longer move.

The first game went by quickly. Po lost, easily.

While Ovi set the board up for another game, Po thought about the day he was rescued. He had learned a trick a long time ago that in order to make the past more palatable you should remove yourself from it and remember it like a story. In one version of the story an old man is walking with a bucket of water and does not feel his leg seize up and he falls onto the forest floor. Surprisingly, he cannot move. He is not sure if he is caught on something, if his leg is twisted in a root, but he lays face-down in the leaves and dirt. He can tell that the daylight is fading. If he doesn't get help soon he'll be dead. The wolves that still haunt the forest will drag him away. He hears something, the breaking of branches, and he leans on his side and sees a dark form between the thin birches. He thinks it is an impossibly large black cat. Even as he thinks this and is terrified a large man's form comes to him and carries him home. The old man curses his clumsiness.

As the second game of chess played out Po could tell that Ovi was making terrible moves. Pity moves. The leper didn't mention it.

“I think you have an eye for the game, Joseph,” Ovi said collecting the pieces and putting them in a small woven sack. Po leaned on his walking stick and began preparations to boil his dinner. Broccoli. Potatoes.

“Do you want to try a story, Po?” Ovi offered. Normally, the vegetable carrier would go now, but tonight he persisted. Po suspected some tumult in Ovi’s life that kept him in the cabin. He could not go home for one reason or another. Perhaps his wife was angry at him. Perhaps he had made a fool of himself and did not wish to be around others. There were sometimes small exiles.

“I can’t remember any good stories,” Po said stacking wood in the fireplace beneath his cooking cauldron.

“You told me one about three hunters. What was it...?” Ovi moved over to the potatoes that needed to be cut. “They went hunting and ended up killing each other because of their foolishness?”

“Can you light the fire?” Po asked.

“Of course,” Ovi left the vegetables and removed some kindling from a small barrel beside the fireplace. “Don’t cut the vegetables. I’ll do it. Sit down and I’ll prepare the stew.”

Po grumbled and threw his hands up in the air. Then he moved to the sheet on the wall and stared at it for a few moments. The flames flanked either side of the Madonna. He placed his hand on the green outline and saw that it had dried.

“What are you planning on painting?” Ovi asked.

“If I tell you a story will you stop asking me questions?”

“Of course,” Ovi said with a piece of flint in his hands, “If you tell me a story we will just sit here and eat stew wordlessly and then I will go.”

“And then I will have peace.”

Po searched his memory for a story he could tell. There were two that came to the surface.

“There was a girl who had three older brothers,” he started.

“And what were their names?”

“No questions,” Po rasped. “There was a girl who had three older brothers. Their father was a noble, well-off, and like most nobles he was the vassal of some greater and more powerful lord. And as is the way of the world, this lord went to war with a neighbor over some dispute of land or honor. When it was asked of the noble who would go to war his three sons happily volunteered. Except, the youngest son, Yuri, was told to stay behind. Should the two older brothers die in battle Yuri would be the sole inheritor of the noble’s estate. It was a sensible request. But sensibility is not often a trait of young men. Yuri leaves in the night, runs away to join the army, but not before his little sister tries to stop him. She pleads. She cries. *You cannot go. I am alone without you.* Yuri was her favorite brother. He did not tease his sister and they would have adventures together in the countryside. He says he will return, and that he is leaving because he cannot simply sit and do nothing while his brothers become men. He is fourteen years old and he runs away. The father is furious but can do nothing. He sends out riders to find Yuri and bring him home, but it is too late. And the little sister waits. Days turn into weeks and then months. She learns the practical skills of being a lady of the house. Etiquette. Sewing. How to raise children. And then Yuri is brought home. His body is brought back on a wagon, hewn and cut down. The girl watches Yuri’s severed arm, wrapped in white cloth like a

loaf bread, handed over to her father. The other brothers' bodies are never found. The noble sets a pyre. Log by log. And the sister helps. They have a service and set the boy's body aflame. The sister watches the flames go up and then, before anyone can stop her, she runs to the fire and throws her body onto the logs and the flames burn away her clothes and she rolls over on her back and every inch of her flesh is licked with fire. Before it can engulf her body entirely her father pulls her off the flames and she survives. Half of her burned. Half of her beautiful. She grows into that body. Her father asks her, *why did you throw yourself on the fire?* But she doesn't answer him. He could never understand."

"Why did she throw herself on the fire?" Ovi asked chopping potatoes.

"I don't know. I don't know that part of the story," Po said.

They shared stew and Ovi told stories. He was trying to have a child. He said that one day his daughter will be delivering Po food. The artist thought he would be dead by then.

*There are years yet, Joseph.*

When Ovi left Po remembered the other story that came into his head.

In this story the old man carried the bucket from the river and sat down on the ground. His foot did not get caught in a root. He did not struggle for hours until his body was utterly exhausted. In this story the old man decided to lean against a tree and wait. Eventually the wolves would come and drag his body away. At one point he sees a dark form between the birches. He calls out to it. *Please come, he says, I am alone without you.* He wants the cat to come and tear him away. In this story he waits. The sun sets and it's dark and he cannot feel the world.

\*

“Where to now?” Hannah whistled holding one of Po’s old paintbrushes dipped in a blue. The artist sat on his bed, arms within his robes, thinking. The sheet had progressed to a point of confusion. He could see the early attempts in the folds, the blacks and reds he had harvested from Timon, the years of work gathering different insects, plants, muds, and crushed bark. Blue was a luxury he knew he could not waste – yet as he squinted his eyes at the sheet, at the canvas, he found nothing there in those layers. He could see his first attempts, the light red along the top, the halo of waxen paint, and then each layer on top of the next. To see a color was to look back in time, but all the colors together, after forty years. He waved his right hand dejectedly at the canvas and reached for his walking stick with his left.

“Need help?” Hannah placed the brush down on the table.

Po shook his head and motioned to the last of the broccoli spread out by the unlit fireplace. He rarely talked. It wasn’t that he couldn’t, but with only a few teeth left his voice sounded like a gummy mess. Hannah gathered the mortar and pestle Po used for mashing food and crushed a few sprigs of the broccoli until it turned into a green sludge. Po motioned for it and scooped a healthy amount with the three fingers on his right hand and whirled it around in his mouth.

“I brought vodka,” Hannah said.

“Good,” Po said. He liked the way the alcohol burned his insides. Hannah’s grandfather, the original vegetable carrier, would not even look the artist in the eyes. After three months of trying to talk with the man, Po simply gave up and stayed cooped up in his cabin when he heard



the blow of the man's horn. That man's son, Michael, often stayed too long. He was kind enough, even gifted Po a chess set which he kept securely under the bed, but that relationship ended when Michael was sent off to fight for some vassal over some strip of land and did not return. Hannah took up the mantle, much younger than the two of them, fifteen, and she was the better of the two that came before. Michael prodded Po with questions. Most of the questions pertained to Po's previous life and the disease, but too often Po felt like the hermit on the mountain, the oracle, without wisdom to give. Hannah did not ask these sorts of questions. She only helped the maestro paint and had brought him blue – crushed woad that had made its way to the village.

Hannah poured the artist a healthy amount of potato vodka in a cup and took a small swig herself before settling down on the only chair. Po did not drink immediately. He sat with the cup on his lap waiting for the right moment.

"Sorry about there not being any fish," Hannah lisped, "The fishermen are busy diverting the river. Don't worry, it's downstream enough not to really affect you. They say that it will help the soil. They've already cleared away most of the trees. My mother said that when she was my age they were lucky to get enough food to last the winter, but now they say food won't be a problem any longer. We make more than enough, and the extra we'll sell, I guess."

Po grunted. Sipped the vodka. He stared at the sheet and tried to find images buried there.

"My father said you played chess with him. Why don't you play chess with me, old man?"

"I lost a few of the pieces," Po coughed, "And I don't remember the game. Not well."

They sat in silence for some time, both of them nursing their vodka. Hannah stared out the dirty window while Po stared at her blurry image. The eyes were going. They had been bad most of his time on the mountainside, but now they could not be trusted. Hannah, for a very long time, had been indistinctly brown, white, deep yellow, peach and a silver sheen of long knife. Po had to ask her one day to come closer, inches away from his face, to finally get a fuller picture. He did not know she was so young until that day, nor that her hair was more than gold, but flecked with white strands that made her head look like butter and cream. She had freckles across her flat nose, and when he asked her to smile he saw that six of her teeth were missing on the bottom which created her lisping whistle that accompanied her words and open mouthed breath.

“Old man,” Hannah said when they had taken enough sips of vodka, “I am sure I have told you before, but we can make room for you in the village. Then I wouldn’t have to march up here every other day to help you.”

“I am a leper.”

“I know that, but there’s no longer a fear of lepers. Not really.”

Had she brought this up before? Po could not remember. He had an inkling Hannah knew that, like his eyesight, his memory was also fading. The big things he remembered distinctly. If he stared at the deep stain in the middle of his cottage floor he could visualize the cat again, bleeding out and dying. He had a single vision of his father, but much like the sheet hanging on the wall, it was indistinct and chaotic. Not genuine. He could see a woman, young, burning in the back of his mind. He could see Hannah’s father, because it had not been so long ago he was bringing him vodka. Each layer was harder to recall the farther he went. He was an

artist. He was diseased. He had been married, but to whom he could not conjure. And he was exiled. These facts stayed with him no matter the years.

“I belong here,” Po said running his fingers through the green remains of the broccoli.

Hannah sighed and went back to the painting, “Is this a woman, here?”

“I cannot see.”

“Between two streaks of red, which I believe is blood, but I’m not going to ask questions about where you get your pigments, there is an eye and part of a nose, and the paint swirls like a flame and then stops right where the top of her head should be. I can’t make out much, but she seems lovely.”

“How many layers of paint?”

“I’m not sure,” Hannah whispered as she counted, “I think maybe six. Six layers. I see the blue we’ve been working with now, and then underneath that is the black we started on last spring, and then below that would have been my father’s time here, but after that it gets messy. I see the green of something, maybe...”

“I painted the Madonna in green, it was all I had. But that was the last thing I tried before my hands could longer hold a brush. It was a disaster. I had no talent left in my fingers.”

“Well, this woman is behind that, and from what little I can discern you still had a bit of talent left in your old fingers. Did you know a woman?”

“Did I know a woman?” Po scoffed, “Of course I knew a woman. You are a woman. I knew women.”

“You know what I mean, Po.”

“I have a recollection.”

“Tell me,” Hannah lisped and teased Po with more vodka, swashing it in the milk jug.

“I don’t remember,” he said, “I can’t bring up the memories anymore. But I will still take your alcohol.”

Hannah did not press the matter. They spoke about small happenings, names and places Po only vaguely recalled. Gola. Slovbank. Haskel. When she finally left, Po eased himself from the bed and hobbled as best he could to the sheet on the wall. He tried to find the woman that Hannah insisted was there, but the light failed him, his eyes had trouble and would not focus. He did an inventory of parts.

Seven fingers.

Three teeth.

Ten toes.

He had just enough light left to find Aaron’s letter underneath the bed next to the chess set. He went out on the porch to read it and afterward, carefully folded the paper along the creases and delicately returned it beneath the bed. On the table Hannah had left him a few bits of black licorice. His taste buds could still pick up the bitterness.

Maybe he could finally go down the mountain. Maybe there was nothing to fear. But Po knew that fear had never been the reason he remained. As the vodka eased him to sleep he tried to find images in the dark.

In the back of his mind, he saw faces. Or maybe it wasn't in his mind at all, but there on the sheet pinioned to the wall. He did an inventory of memories:

There was his father, though the man was no more distinct to Po than any other man that came rushing into his head. His father would lay out the parts of animals, their ribs, their legs, their insides. He'd cut away the cheek of a pig and say that it was the best part. His fingers traced little trails of blood throughout their home, along doors, window sills, bits of cookery, and even on Po himself, little smears of red along his wrist. The man was an odd lump of flesh, folds that held up his head, strange muscles that seemed to mimic the cuts of meat. Po searched for something more, but all he fetched was this static image of a man he considered his father surrounded by parts. He was no more a part of Po than his missing fingers, long severed.

He knew a woman. Hannah's question was ridiculous. He knew a woman. At least, there was a piece of a woman. She had golden hair and seemed young, younger than Hannah, not yet refined in the kiln of womanhood. They held hands. Po searched the sheet on the wall and saw that they held hands, and in one great cacophony of color the woman sprung forward and her body was mangled. Po could see her head cracked open on the street spilling small bits that made up her whole being. Stray cats went to nibble at the brains. In a swipe of blue, just below a blackened shadow of a building, Po saw himself weeping, but did not understand whatever machination pumped this sadness through the body.

What had they said? When Po went by another name and painted banal uninspired pieces of soldiers marching in formation, banners, tall pikes, and parades to commemorate some fickle and fragile independence, the nobles were always happy, but what had his peers said? *This is removed. Cold nationalism. Where's the sacrifice? Where are the bodies? The furor of the battlefield? These paintings are a pale reflection of truth.* He was never really a painter. The techniques came naturally, but never the soul. He was a middling artist. He saw this now, in his memories, in the canvas, the approving and smiling faces of rich men. They had burned his paintings. They had destroyed the statue of Madonna in Hhaskel – white limbs and powder stacked for burial.

He heard a voice in the cottage. *Then the rumors are true. The disease does turn men to stone.* Po examined the sheet again, his face inches from the thick application of paints over the years. It was very possible that somewhere in the swirls and sinews of the colors a woman could be found. The cottage grew dark. He began to run his remaining fingers across what he assumed was a landscape of ridges and cracked valleys. He imagined he could go down the mountain. They would bring him to a room, visit with him, pray with him, and ask for guidance. The transformation would be complete. The small parts of him that were left would be replaced. He thought of his severed pinky, black and congealing in a little box with a latch. As the vodka weighed heavy in his head he thought maybe he could sever the last bits and really believe that they were never him.

His body slumped and moved as if it shouldered some weight. Po moved toward the bed but stopped short and slowly went down to the floor. He slept on the dark and ancient stain.

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Po surveyed Hannah's latest offering. More broccoli. More cabbage. More squash. Po winced at the sight of it. He went searching with his hands for something more promising. Licorice. Jam. Wine. It was difficult now, even in the daylight, to make sense of things. As Hannah explained that her younger brother would be taking over the weekly deliveries, Po opened his eyes and closed them again and again.

"Do I still have my eyelids?" he rasped.

"Yes, old man," Hannah's blurry image came into an ocean of light greens and flaxen yellows.

"Can you help me pull up the garden?" Po asked.

"Harvest time already?"

"I think it will be a good one," Po felt the ground for his walking stick and then floated along with Hannah to the side of the cabin where he saw crisscrossed emeralds and pale oranges dolloped across brown. He heard Hannah walking through the crops.

"These look fine to eat," she said, "I think we've done good work here. You barely need me anymore."

"When you come again, bring me another pair of boots."

"I will tell Ulric to bring you some. He is eager to meet you."

Po waved his hand in disgust.

“I was going to save this for my last visit, but seeing you are in one of your famously foul moods,” Po heard the sloshing of liquid in Hannah’s milk jug. The artist licked his lips and found the stoop of the porch and sat himself down.

“Did you tear the sheet down?” Hannah asked settling in beside him.

“I did,” Po rolled his eyes and waited patiently for the jug to be passed to him.

“I quite liked it.”

“We can put up a new one. Though you have no talent for paint.”

“Well, you have no talent for chewing solid food.”

There was a brief silence. Then he was pushed, slightly, until he figured it was Hannah’s body nudging his and he heard her voice, “I am sorry. I am sorry. You usually laugh at my pathetic jokes.”

“You have the posture of a two-legged donkey,” Po said.

“Drink your vodka, old man.”

He waited for Hannah to tell him that the jug was in his hands and then he maneuvered it up to his lips and got most of it in his mouth. There was still life in the taste buds toward the back of his tongue that gave a kick.

“I am getting married,” Hannah said.

“You are too young,” Po responded.

“I am twenty-four, Po. Some would call that too old. His name is Anatoly. My mother doesn’t like him. She wants me to marry someone safe, someone who has a sturdy home and a good crop yield. But Anatoly, I love him. He wants us to cross the Urals into Russia. There is work



there. And things are not so good. There is talk of more war. Anatoly wants to flee and I wonder does this make him a coward? I don't think it does, I think it makes him a human being. But I know if I go I cannot come back. Father died going to war. My mother would not have me be with a coward," Po heard Hannah wipe away her nose with the sleeve of her shirt. His hearing had not gone dull. It was the only thing that grew stronger.

"I know a story about a young woman and a boy who goes to war," Po said.

"Tell me." Hannah lifted in her voice as if she had finally removed some great impediment.

"I don't remember," Po said.

"You don't remember that you knew a story about a woman and a boy who goes to war?"

"I can't conjure it," Po said, running his hand palm the jug of vodka. It was there, wasn't it? He tried to shape it like clay in his hands. He muttered under his breath, *I am a leper. I am a leper.* Then his lips found the tip of the jug and he felt the burn of the vodka down his throat and in his belly. Hannah went on talking, but Po caught very little of it. Instead, he envisioned himself a younger man walking in small secluded places, not real, but imagined places that he once put down on canvas. Meadows. Harbors. Bridges with little copses of trees along the bank of the river where flowers grew. He had known a woman, he had known about a boy who went to war, but those details were no longer important. They became colors that bled into backgrounds where he found himself, imaginary, walking.

Hannah, a blur of yellow and morning oranges, wanted to know what she should do. Po caught her voice in a mixture of silver and black that played through another fading vista that, if

he concentrated, could produce the scent of sweat and burnt chicken skin in a dim bedroom impossibly far away. There, it melted, and he tried to find the dimensions of the milk jug in his hands, not smooth. Not rough. Nothing.

“Let me pick that up,” Hannah said, reaching for what Po figured was the vodka. He must have dropped it. It must have slipped through his numb fingers.

“I can no longer see,” Po said.

“I know that,” Hannah responded, “You have been blind for some time.”

“I want you to take the painting,” Po said, “I want you to take it when you go with your husband. I will not paint again.”

Hannah stayed with Po until the nightfall and then for several hours afterward. He wondered if she was waiting for him to fall asleep. Waiting for a convenient time to remove herself that would be less painful. When Po showed no sign of getting tired she asked for the sheet, which Po had rolled up and placed under the bed. Hannah assured him that her little brother was just as considerate as her, but Po merely waved his three-fingered hand and grumbled. Then, she left. Po felt the absence immediately. In the dark, with no sight, he felt like a ghost. Unfeeling. The only clue that he still existed was the filling of the lungs. The beating of the heart. These parts he moved, soundlessly.

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Po could no longer see the world as it actually was and feared that his eyelids had indeed fallen away like the dead skin of a snake. He could still make out the light and the

darkness. Vegetables still arrived at his door from the village, though this time he didn't ask for a name, he did not even know if it was a person bringing him food. He'd mush up the vegetables in the same mortar he used to make paint in and eat the sludge. Every tooth was gone now. At some point, he was sure that his foot was going because the act of moving around seemed impeded by something tugging at the ground – a lame appendage being dragged across the wood and grass.

In these almost alien moments of not seeing and not feeling Po would hear voices and he'd respond in long painful syllables. The only real visitor he had for many years was a logger from the village explaining that the woods near the cabin were to be cut down and removed. They were going to use the river to float the logs down the mountainside. Po said only one thing, *I am a leper*, while the man kept his distance and explained the change. After the removal of the trees Po could no longer hear birdsong during the day, not as much, and this made the days even more quiet and strange.

He found himself thinking about painting. Not his old paintings, those he did not remember. He could not recall even the most famous portrait or basilica or statue. He did not think of painting as a whole, but just the act of painting, the movement of the hand delicately touching the canvas. Even if Po had kept all his fingers, the hands were now permanently gnarled and he had trouble even finding his walking stick, let alone his brushes which remained unused and crusted in some corner of the cabin. He could still move his wrist and his arm. This he could do.

“I have come here out of curiosity. When the village told me a man once lived on the mountainside in such a state, blind, no feeling, no ability to move, with one hand, no fingers, no hair, no lips, eyelids missing and no nose, what person wouldn’t come to look and see? Do you need help, sir? I can get one of my men to help you out of this cabin and we can take in the spring air?”

“I would enjoy that.”

“Very good! Gere, help this man. Help him to the chairs. Set the chairs about the grass and bring out coffee. Bring out chocolate? Have you had chocolate, sir?”

“I do not remember.”

“I can grind it up into a powder for you. What is your name?”

“I don’t know. I think...P, I think.”

“P? Alright. Well, P, my name is Erik. Erik Weber. I am part of the German Wehrmacht that has annexed Poland. Did you know you are now a part of Germany?”

“I did not know I was Polish.”

“Ha! How long have you been up here?”

“Days. Days now.”

“Does your hand work? Can you grip a cup? I have set a cup out before you with coffee. It is hot, be careful.”

“I am a leper.”

“Yes, I know. I know.”

“I do not think I can grip the cup. Would you lift it to my mouth?”

“Yes, of course. Gere, lift the cup to this man’s mouth. There you are, P. How does that taste?”

“I cannot taste it. But it does warm my body. Thank you.”

“P, I must ask, because I am curious, how does a man like you persist in such a state? How do you eat? How do you drink? I have seen much stronger men than you succumb and give up and perish.”

“I am a leper. I do not know. I do not know these things. I am brought food from the village. I am given water from the river.”

“Sir, I do not understand. The people of that village thought you dead. I came here because of old wives tales. You are folklore. They knew the cabin still stood, but only ghosts remained. That river no longer flows. Yet, here you are. Gere, find this man some clothes. I can fetch water. Would you care for a bath?”

“I do not wish for a bath.”

“Very well. I must apologize beforehand. My men searched your cabin while you slept. We were looking for something, but we found you and such a curiosity you are. I imagine you cannot read. But I have here a letter of sorts found in your cabin, old, tattered, its ink barely visible, but I could read it to you. I think you’ll want me to.”

“I do not know. I burned them.”

“Yet one remains. Shall I?”

“I can’t run away, can I?”

"I can fold it up and place it back in your cabin if you would prefer. Still, I think you'll want to hear the words."

"I will not fight you."

"Very well. *To my husband*, is how it begins. Very fine script. Elegant. *To my husband who fears his own skin and the love of his own wife. I have taken your pinky and buried it in Gola. I set a marker there, a slip of wood with a blue ribbon, and imagine lost limbs bent in prayer at the loss of such a beautiful piece of human being.* Such a line. Did you know this woman? She sounds poetic. My wife cannot write even a good recipe. It continues, *The pinky in the right light was pale, with little flecks of clay underneath the fingernail, and it remembers my lips and my eyes and my face. Its mate, the one still soldiering on the left side of you, has similar proportions, though I see it mostly in silhouette, upended while we rest as if you are sculpting in your sleep. The ring finger is bare, here. Traditionally, we must travel once again back to the other hand, where a band of silver now only cushioned on one side tells the morning we were wed. This finger is not my favorite, but it is wrapped in me just the same. I placed the ring somewhere safe, and if you ever wish to look at it let me know and I will take you there. The middle fingers are my favorite fingers. This is due to somewhat selfish reasons, where the nails have been finely smoothed and, being one of your most artistic expressions, also touch certain parts of me most favorably. This leaves, of course, the last two pointers and the majesty they have created surpass even me. Each has a callus, small, where they have gripped a brush for almost the entirety of their lives. Attached to these fingers, as one would expect, are your hands, maestro. Now, the left hand has a little crease that runs below your pinky all the way up to the middle, and in that deepening valley you made me, and its wrinkles now splay from your thumb like the rings of trees. The right hand --"*

“Stop this.”

“This is a description of you, sir. An inventory of parts of when you were...”

“I do not know what this is. I do not wish to know what this is.”

“When was the last time you heard these words?”

“Leave me, please. Leave me alone.”

“*Broad shouldered, it reads, broad shouldered, but weak. You could not even hold up my weight. My dainty form.* Your hair color. It was brown. Shoulder length. According to this woman it was like auburn gold whose tresses were sometimes dipped in paint. Who was this woman? Do you remember her name?”

“I do not remember. I do not remember. Give me my things. Let me rip this letter. Let me rip it apart.”

“Such remembrances. Do you want to know the color of your eyes?”

“No.”

“P! You have fallen! Gere, lift this man up! Lift him up!”

“Leave me! You’ll turn to rot! Leave me! Don’t touch my skin!”

“Carry him to his bed. Carry him to his bed and we will go.”

### Part 3

Leningrad looks decimated. Even this many years after the war, the buildings still have black around the windowsills of brand new panes. Bullet holes in the brickwork. In some places, where entire walls have fallen away, the Soviets have put up banners and posters promising a brave new future which flap ineffectually in the wind. The people look no less worn. No less resolute. In their eyes one can see three years of a siege and especially now - it is 1953 and Stalin is dead.

Thomas walks with Valentin down another street corner, passed more signs of shelling and new fabricated refurbishing and notes the bullet casings that lie hidden just off sidewalks in snake weed. Valentin has been kind. He has carried Thomas's luggage, a single red case dangling with stamped tags, all the way from the train station. Along the way Thomas makes small talk. He mentions that Leningrad was once Petrograd. Before that it was St. Petersburg. Valentin simply nods and says, *yeah, yeah, yeah*, in a smiling voice that betrays a bit of consternation. Thomas can't place it exactly – surprise that Thomas, an American, has taken so much interest in his city, but dismayed perhaps that New York, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Chicago, these cities



never had to go through eight hundred days of German shelling. Snipers. Thomas, just by his very presence, brings up the war without bringing up the war.

Valentin comes to a small apartment building, relatively unmarred, save a crushed banister and a few bullet holes along the cement foundation. The young man places Thomas's luggage down and produces a key from his pants' pocket. Thomas has marveled since he arrived in the USSR how uniform the young men look. Stern. Short cropped hair. Unflagging loyalty to a single color of clothing. In Valentin's case it is olive green, but the young man has chosen a yellow ascot tied around his neck, which Thomas likes to think is an act of rebellion. Even as he has these thoughts, Thomas stops himself. It's impossible to see the entire picture.

Up a narrow flight of wooden stairs that creak with pre-war age they arrive at Valentin's home.

"Take off your shoes," Valentin says removing his own boots and placing them next to six pairs of other shoes that line the hallway. Thomas takes off his loafers and nods. He regrets a hole in the big toe of his right sock.

The apartment is *cozy*. That's the word Thomas decides on. It is small and contains furniture for a much more ambitious domicile. Flower print wallpaper, swirling carpets of red and white and purple, cabinet displays of plates and glasses, and it seems in every corner (which there are few) and every available wall (of which there are four) the home has been littered with silver, and gold, and paintings and nick-knacks too innumerable to categorize.

Valentin slurs something in Russian, places Thomas's luggage by the door near a coatrack full of heavy jackets, and heads into a kitchenette. Thomas takes in his surroundings and nervously removes his knitted gloves. *You'll need these*, Anna said when he told her he was

going to Leningrad to look at a painting. From the looks of things, *good taste* wasn't on the tip of his tongue if he had to describe Valentin's family so far.

"Sugar cube?" Valentin holds up a white cube. Thomas shakes his head and Valentin shrugs and pops the cube in his mouth.

"Your father wrote me that letter, right?" Thomas asks.

"Yes," Valentin says pulling a jar of preserves from a cabinet. "Apricot?"

"No," Thomas says. "Do you know where the painting is?"

Valentin shrugs again and runs a butter knife through the yellow jam and licks it clean from the blade.

"Is your father at work?"

"Yes," Valentin motions to a loaf of bread and asks Thomas if he would like some toast. This goes on for several minutes, with various different parcels of food, until Thomas sits uncomfortably on the couch and Valentin loses interest in being a hospitable host. At one point a young black haired woman comes in wearing the same olive green clothes as Thomas. He cannot understand what they are saying, but he likes to imagine they are lovers and are sneaking around. He likes to think they will run away together. He thinks that he thinks these things because he wants to place everyone in these universal romantic terms. He wants to humanize everyone – and then he thinks that this wishful thinking is actually *dehumanizing*, and that licking apricot jelly from a knife might be more humanizing than some fanciful romance he has conjured in his head. The young woman laughs, eyes Thomas, says something thick and garbled and whispered as if Thomas could understand and then she produces a bundle of cigarettes wrapped in foil from her jacket pocket.

“Sigareta?” she says pushing them toward Thomas.

Thomas nods and takes one. The woman politely strikes up a cigarette for each of them with a match. The taste of the tobacco is acrid. Cheap.

“Marina will take you to the painting,” Valentin says, “My father has it in storage. It is a long walk but she is good company. Just make sure you have your papers.”

“We’re not waiting for your father then?”

“There’s no telling what time he will be home.”

Thomas scrambles to find his travel papers in his small suitcase. The Soviet government gave the exact dates of his allotted time in the Soviet Union, the hotel he had been assigned to stay at and other personal and pertinent information including the address of his art gallery in New York and that he was to have contact with the Sokolov family, each family member listed, and on it he found Marina’s name. Marina Sokolov – engineering student at the Leningrad Higher Party School. Thomas erases the idea that Valentin and Marina are lovers from his imagination, but he admires their smiles, the tone of their voices that do not require translation – they are close. Thomas was never close to his sisters. They are both married in some newly erected Cincinnati suburb. He has not been back to Ohio in ten years.

Outside the apartment Marina puts on freshly shined black boots. She slips them on, effortlessly. In fact, Thomas thinks this young woman, maybe nineteen, maybe twenty years old, has been carefully constructed – the bob of her black hair short and trim, the seams of her olive drab entirely sculpted to impossible measure, there seems to be not a freckle out of place, even the buttons on her jacket pockets have been carefully cleaned. If Thomas had not seen her laugh or act so familiar with Valentin he’d believe her a perfect caricature of a young determined

communist. As the two descend the stairs to the streets of Leningrad, Marina quickly extinguishes her cigarette on a nearby wall and stands up straight, smiles at Thomas, and then replaces the smile with a stern and what Thomas understands now is a completely fabricated grimace.

Valentin was not lying. The storage facility is a long walk. Along the way Thomas learns Marina knows a little English. Her father is slowly teaching her and Valentin to speak the language, but her older brother seems to have a better handle on it. The city makes Thomas uncomfortable. Not in the ways he expected. He prepared himself for the post-war aftermath. No, it was something else. The people, maybe. There seemed to be such a mixture of despair and hope in equal measure on every face that he felt a kind of guilt. He was in the war. He served on a hospital ship in the Pacific. But never had the war touched his family. His sisters. His wife. His country. Men were conscripted and volunteered and were shipped off. They were *removed*. Never had they faced invasion. It was the difference between the shock of a severed limb and the slow decay of an infection. The faces that Thomas sees on the streets of Leningrad are still in a fever-dream. It's not just *uncertainty* that he feels, but the denial of uncertainty – bombed out buildings and bright banners.

The storage facility is surprisingly unmarred - rows of grey buildings inside a low wall. Marina talks with the man on duty. He carries a Kalashnikov and constantly darts his eyes between the two of them. After twenty minutes, and what Thomas supposes is some flirting, he opens the gate and Marina leaves the man a cigarette and takes Thomas to the painting.

It is the only thing in the Sokolov storage unit, rolled up within some kind of beaded mat. Marina helps Thomas place the mat on the floor and then she pulls a knife from her boot and cuts away at three wires that have been tied around the bundle. Thomas asks Marina to

stand back and he unfurls the mat, carefully. A layer of wax paper covers the painting itself, tacked with small pins. Through the haze of the paper Thomas can see sedated colors. He removes each pin and then the paper.

What Thomas first sees is chaos. Blue that bleeds into brown and green. There's no form to discern. There's no style to date it. He can tell it's old. The exact age he cannot pinpoint. He removes a pair of disposable gloves from his back pocket and lifts the canvas, which he notices is a fabric, untraditional. It is old. The discoloration on the back of the fabric, the oxidation, it tells Thomas that it's perhaps a century or more. If it had been left out, Thomas thinks that the fabric would have fallen apart, easily, but whoever stored the painting took great pains to keep it safe. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply through the nose. It doesn't always work, but he definitely picks up hints that wherever this was once stored, it smells like nature. If it smelled like tobacco or polish he could figure it was once displayed in someone's house. He notices holes in the corners of the fabric. This thing wasn't stretched out like a traditional canvas. It was a blanket or sheet that was nailed or pinned to a wall. He looks at the thickness of the paint. In some places there are great globs of uneven pigment. The paints used may not have been traditional, either. There was a lack of uniformity in their spread. Thomas can see evidence of other paintings buried beneath the thick applications of the final layer. He notices half a woman's face. The tips of fingers. Colors that spill out from others in jagged and strange configurations.

Thomas has been staring at the painting for several minutes. Marina reminds him of her presence by striking up another match to light a cigarette.

"There are different pieces here," Thomas says standing up straight and placing his hands on his hips. He goes around the sheet in a circle trying to catch the painting at different

angles. The natural light coming in from the open door of the storage unit cascades across the painting in equally chaotic ways, but Thomas does not believe this is intentional. He cannot tell the correct orientation of the work.

“Good?” Marina questions.

“I think it’s remarkable, but ultimately I am not sure if it is *worth* anything,” Thomas says, not sure if Marina understands him. His words cause him exhaustion. He came all the way to Russia for *this*? Anna was pregnant at home, almost due, and he threw the gallery on her shoulders and jumped a plane in hopes of finding a Russian master, but this was not what he expected. Marina saunters to the entrance of the storage unit and leans against the frame. Thomas looks down at the painting and then joins her.

“Why me?” Thomas asks.

“You know art,” she answers.

“Yes, but so do experts in Moscow. At the Hermitage. In New York City I’m small potatoes.”

“Small potatoes,” Marina repeats.

“I’m not...” Thomas sighs, “I’m not a big guy. Okay? I own a gallery in Manhattan filled with the last ruins of cubism and post-impressionism. I came here because your father, in the letter he wrote, he was adamant that he had something special. I came across the damn world. My wife is eight months pregnant. Why did your family want *me* to come look at this painting?”

“You’re the only one,” Marina says.

“The only one? The only one who came?”

“Yes. My father wrote many men. You are the only one who comes.”

Thomas nods dejectedly. He smells rain in the air.

\*

Anatoly Sokolov is a trim well-proportioned man with a military haircut and a gaze of restlessness. When Thomas first sees him the man is in a haze of smoke in the kitchen of his family’s apartment, cigarette bobbing from his lower lip, a masher in his rough reddened hands plowing a pot full of cream and potatoes. Marina announces their arrival, the two of them soaked through from the rainstorm, and takes over for her father who rushes toward Thomas with an outstretched hand. The man’s grip is a vice.

“Mr. Thomas Milquist,” Anatoly’s booming voice fills the room as thickly as the smoke, “It is good to meet you. I apologize I could not take you to the painting myself, but I was detained. Anatoly Sokolov,” he gestures to himself, “And you have met Marina and Valentin. That leaves little Osha, who is hopefully at a friend’s home and not causing too much mischief, eh? Cigarette? A drink, maybe? No? Alright, then. Come and tell me what you think about my heirloom.”

Anatoly leads Thomas through a small hallway to a packed bedroom where he pushes a few boxes from two chairs. He tips over several stacks of paper and curses. In a small desk drawer he pulls a bottle of olives and places it on a little desk. Then he throws Thomas a hidden rag from the floor to dry off with.

“Olives?” Anatoly offers. Thomas shakes his head.

“Your son offered me marmalade and toast and sugar cubes. Do Russians sit down to actual meals?”

Anatoly laughs and spits an olive pit into an old ashtray.

“You’ll know the answer to that in about an hour, if you’ll stay?”

“Of course.”

“The painting, Thomas. Do not leave me in...uh...*suspense*?”

“Mr. Sokolov, I am grateful the hospitality of your family and you contacting me, but I’m afraid that your painting isn’t worth much. Not from my initial examination. It is old, and that might factor into its worth, but I’m sorry...”

As Thomas fumbles with his words he sees Anatoly’s face crumble, though the kind of devastation is slightly off, because as Thomas talks his eyes begin to water and he rises from his chair and goes to close the door to the bedroom. Thomas twists around in his chair and watches as Anatoly leans his short buzz-cut white hair onto the door.

“Forgive my candidness, Mr. Sokolov, but is this just about the painting? Marina told me that you wrote several people in the States. I am apparently the only one that was desperate enough to actual come to Leningrad.”

“My great-great grandmother crossed into Russia from Poland with that painting,” Anatoly says, “And when I was a little boy I would open it up and stare at it for hours, trying to find little bits and pieces. I suppose it was worth more to me than what an *expert* can give me. But you are correct, Thomas. I have not been entirely honest with you. I was hoping it was worth more, not because I need the money, I am okay, my family is okay, but...” Anatoly sits down on his small bed, the springs creaking beneath his weight.



“Mr. Sokolov,” Thomas says, not able to hide the frustration in his voice, “I left my wife to be here with you. This trip is very expensive.”

“My wife died shortly after giving birth to Marina.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“When Trotsky tried to overthrow Stalin my wife was caught on the wrong side. It was a miracle that I managed to hide myself and Valentin and Marina. I never cared for Trotsky, or Lenin or Stalin, they’re all dead and I don’t care about any of them, but I do care about my children. You understand this?”

“Of course,” Thomas says. He sees Anna’s face. He sees his hand moving across her belly the morning he left for the USSR.

“I want to leave here. I have someone. A woman I met during the war. She is in the United States and she is waiting for me. I would go there and take my children but your government is only letting Soviets into the country for special or *cultural* circumstances. I was hoping that the painting, if bought by a rich American, would buy us a ticket. You could sponsor us,” Anatoly runs his hands across the top of his head, “But I see that I was being foolish. I am sorry, Thomas. I am sorry I brought you here.”

They sit in silence. The sound of a wooden spoon being hit against the edge of pot lid is heard from the kitchen. *Clack! Clack! Clack!* Thomas shifts nervously in his seat. He could not make the painting worth the price of Anatoly’s family. He could not even make it worth the price of the trip. Even if he lied. Not just the painting. But Thomas could sell a story. He tries to picture the rolled up sheet on the back of Anatoly’s great-great grandmother as she heads north. If he

could find where the painting came from he could fill in the gaps. He could create a story worth Anatoly's price. He hears his wife's voice...

*You're too nice, Thomas. You're too accommodating.*

"Tell me about your great-great grandmother, Anatoly?" Thomas asks.

\*

"He says that the town has not fully recovered from the war," Thomas's interpreter motions to the exposed brick of some of the homes, the chipped away cement, bullet casings still littering the tufts of untended and dying grass. The boy who says this, he is maybe thirteen, and waves at Thomas with a grin and asks him about *Superman*. Thomas smiles back, thinks about Anna, his own son (or daughter) due in just a matter of months. His interpreter, a man named Jakub, who goes by Harrison, looks around like they've walked into the dying moments of someone else's loved one.

"The Germans came through in '39?" Thomas asks.

"Yes," Harrison affirms without even asking the boy who stands impatiently, "But the real damage was done by the Communists. They came through and burned the village down on their way to Berlin. Before that..." he confers with the boy who shrugs his shoulders and says something, "...his mother says the town was struggling. It wasn't even called Prafta, it was called...uh, Krevystaw. He thinks maybe it had other names, but now the older folk call it Krevystaw and the younger call it Prafta."

Thomas takes another long gaze at the small village. It had taken him three weeks to get here, three weeks of researching Anatoly's family, finding out that his great-great grandmother

left very little clues to her migration. She had apparently snuck into Russia with her husband. He found that the Polish name Supko had turned into Sokolov and that the village's name had changed as well. He wasn't even sure Prafa was the village he was looking for and felt another bout of defeat begin to weigh on his shoulders.

"Ask him if any famous artists lived here," Thomas said.

The boy laughs.

"No," Harrison also smirks, "This is not the place for famous artists."

Thomas looks at a nearby building whose roof has collapsed. Beyond a fence are hurried graves that have been dug with cheap wooden crosses as markers. Beyond that the road continues up along the mountainside that looms over the village. The forest along the mountain's base looks like it is recovering from over-logging. There are still people here. They look tired. They look beleaguered. Thomas takes a walk with Harrison up and down the streets. He thinks this is exactly the kind of place famous artists come from.

Thomas looks for the elderly. He talks with them and tries to get answers. The sheet came from this village. It found its way to Leningrad. Leningrad was Petrograd was Saint Petersburg. Stalin was dead. Eastern Europe was carved into parts. His nephew was in Korea. His wife was pregnant. All day he has these thoughts, and all day Harrison asks, *how long are we to stay?*

He finds a woman, old. Her name is Greta. They get nowhere at first. Thomas is fishing for answers and Harrison is returning with nothing on the line. Still, Thomas persists. They go to her home, remarkably unmarred by the war, and in her small living room there's a helmet, iron, bent and fashioned like something from centuries ago. Thomas tries to conjure up his training of

critiquing art objects, but the period escapes him. This is not his repertoire. Harrison asks her about it and Greta says that when they were cutting down the trees around Krevystaw they found two skeletons half-buried in the earth wearing the robes of a monk and the rusted armor of a soldier. Her great-grandfather took the helm and it has stayed in the family ever since. They talk about Greta's family. Two of her brothers died in war (as did one of her grandsons). They had made a living tending goats, but that changed and as the family fell on hard times they got by simply through the kindness of others in the village. They still leave Greta food at her doorstep, as it is clear her other relations are dead or have moved on. She got by on odd jobs. Her husband, who would go on to die of a rheumatism, left her little and, she supposes, that pitied her to others.

Thomas asks Greta about local folklore.

The old woman has two stories.

The first is that there is man who lives on the mountainside and has lived there for centuries. As a tradition, or maybe staving off bad luck, they leave an offering on the doorstep of an old cabin, nestled just above the tree line, every month (twice at Christmastime). A popular game is for the young boys in Krevystaw to go up to the cabin and spend the night, but she has not heard that any of them have lasted a night, or they have come back pale-faced and silent. To this story, she says there is some truth, that a man did live there long ago, and that her great aunt knew him and stole a painting from him, and this is why a ghost haunts the cabin, and this is why Krevystaw is cursed.

The second is about a cat. Folklore persists that at some point a great large panther escaped its cage from a traveling menagerie. Four men went into the woods to hunt it down and only one returned. The man was hysterical and ran quickly from the village to whatever lord he

served. Of course, a beast like that running free on the mountain has lent plenty to scaring young children and has been the local explanation for several missing dogs over the years. Greta claims, though, that she has seen it. She has seen a great black form moving through the trees. The room quiets and Harrison breaks the silence by asking for another tart.

Once the two are outside, Thomas asks Harrison if he is up for a climb.

\*

The trees along the way are young. They're recovering from years of logging. Most of the men in Prafta had not returned from Western Poland or had been forcibly conscripted by the Wehrmacht to stave off the Soviet Union. This meant the lumber mills in Prafta remained still and quiet. Thomas makes confident strides up a mountain path clear of underbrush. It looks to have been made over the years from steady marches. Harrison lags behind. The interpreter asks about the cat. If it's real. Thomas shakes his head and gives reassuring words that it is just an old folktale.

When they get past the tree line they see a cabin. The last bits of the day are beginning to fade. The condition of the cabin surprises Thomas. It isn't pristine by any means, but it doesn't show any real damage from years of hard rain and wood-rot. The roof is still intact. The single window is caked with dirt, but not broken. The porch has seen better days. Vines and lichen have collapsed the three small steps leading up to the door. The side of the cabin is overgrown with long leafed horseradish plants.

Harrison picks a cigarette butt off the grass, "Someone still comes up here."

Thomas carefully climbs on the porch and shoots out his hands as the wood creaks beneath his feet. The door only opens a crack. Through the opening he can see it has been tied off with a piece of fabric. He checks his pockets, unfolds a small pocket knife, and cuts his way in. Harrison stays outside.

It smells lived in, the fireplace looks ashen, but fresh logs are stacked next to it. Thomas can see a few green tinted bottles on a table near the window. The first thing he does is pick up the ribbon he just cut. It's black and frayed, but not old enough. No, it still has strength in its fibers. Someone *does* still come up here. There's a bed in the corner with no mattress, but on the floor there are blankets laid out. Thomas smirks. He figures some young lovers come up here, sometimes. He walks further into the cabin and shoves the black ribbon in his pocket. He notices names etched into the walls. There's an old wooden crate with nothing inside but broken splinters and a pair of calipers. Then, he notices a bit of cloth tacked to the wall. He can't decide its original color, but it hangs from a rusted nail. He tries to pry the nail out with his pocket-knife, but just decides to cut it off instead. It almost falls apart in his fingers.

Something hung here, once.

Thomas begins looking closely at everything. Every floorboard. Every small inch of the cabin.

He finds between two of the boards a congealed glob of red wax. He finds more cigarette butts. Pieces of glass. Bits of insects. Parts. He asks Harrison to bring in a flashlight and the two of them do a thorough investigation.

The floor is stained. There's a darkened almost completely faded hue in the middle of the cabin which looks outlined in a lighter brown. It does not look natural. Then, Thomas checks under the bed. There's a gnarled branch tucked toward the back. As he tries to fish this out he

upends one of the small floorboards and gives a yelp of surprise that causes Harrison to yell out in fear.

Thomas comes out from under the bed with a long flat wooden box. It looks like a folded chess set board. The box is carefully opened and within is a small leather-bound journal, a folded piece of paper, and clothing.

“Thomas...” Harrison whispers.

They place the chess board down and sit cross-legged on floor.

“Gloves,” Thomas says, “We brought gloves, correct?”

“No,” Harrison says, “You said we were tracking down an artist.”

“Right,” Thomas sighed, “We’ll not touch the paper too long. Just long enough to unfold it. Anyway, the clothing looks more recent.”

Thomas carefully moved the other items aside and took the clothing out. It was a shirt, black and white striped, with a yellow star on the chest. It was a relic from the war. Both men stare at it, dumbfounded.

“How far is Auschwitz?” Thomas asks.

“Far,” Harrison says, “But some Jews went north toward Scandinavia. It’s not impossible one of them found the cabin. Maybe stayed here a few nights. You think that’s your artist?”

Thomas shakes his head, “No. Whoever painted that sheet lived here long before that. Did you fight in the war?”

“Me?” Harrison places the clothing beside him delicately, “No. When the Germans came through my family fled to Latvia. Didn’t help. The Soviets occupied. Then the Nazis. But I didn’t fight,” he clears his throat, “Did you?”

“Yes. I was in the Navy,” Thomas says, “The Pacific on a hospital ship.”

The two men share a grim silence and stare at the rest of the treasures in the box. Thomas motions to the letter and asks Harrison to lightly touch the corners. The paper looks old, yellowed, on the brink of falling apart. Harrison takes a corner in his fingers and, one fold after another, gets the letter open. The script is still legible, but Harrison looks at it strangely. It is written so small as if the writer had only the single sheet.

“Can you read it?” Thomas asks.

Harrison nods. “*To my husband who fears his own skin and...*” he tries to make out the next few words but shakes his head, “We’ll have to spend some time on it. It’s hard to read in this light and the script is so small...”

Thomas picks up the journal and unlatches the leather. A few of the molded pages fall out. He doesn’t know the language, but he sees several drawings of a panther. He points these out to Harrison and hands him the journal to interpret. He can’t read most of it, but there are a few passages that are legible and Harrison struggles with it. They decide to read it later and write it down. As they are getting ready to leave, Harrison notices a name scrawled on the last page of the journal.

*Mikael Joselewicz.*

*Was here four days with seven others.*

*To those who go looking, we have laid the old man to rest.*



*We have taken his clothing and some of his food.*

1945

“Old man...” Thomas repeats the words.

“But not your painter,” Harrison corrects.

“No,” Thomas sighs, “Not likely. Come on. It is getting dark.”

The two men make their way outside. Thomas asks if there are wolves in the mountains and Harrison laughs. There are no more wolves. They were hunted out of the mountains years ago. Yet, in Thomas thinks he sees dark movement in the trees along their descent.

\*

Stockholm is a wonder of medieval stone and modern light. The post-war sadness is not as thick here and Thomas takes delight in the smiles from pretty women walking down the streets. The apartment he is looking for is nestled between brand new department stores on the waterfront where he spies countless little islands that pour into the Baltic. He rings the bell.

“Hej,” says a man from a window above. Thomas can’t get a good look at him.

“Hello? English?”

“Yeah,” says the man.

“Is this the Joselewicz residence?”

“No,” the man says. There’s a pause and Thomas is about to shout up another question when a woman’s voice replaces the man’s.

“This is the Thomlinson’s,” she says, “But my mother was Joselewicz from her first husband. Who are you?”

“I’m an art dealer,” Thomas shakes his head, “I found your father’s name in a cabin in Poland. I wanted to ask him some questions. But, I suppose he is no longer able to give them. I am sorry.”

“You can come up,” the woman says.

The apartment is full of people. Small children running in their underwear, an old man reading in a chair, young men in the kitchenette listening to the radio. The smell of vegetable brine bubbles up from a cooking pot on the stove. Thomas removes his scarf but keeps his coat on and awkwardly holds his hat against his chest as he dodges another running child. A young woman, blonde, blue eyed, approaches Thomas and asks for his coat. She introduces herself as Hilma.

“I can make you coffee?” she asks.

“No,” Thomas says, “I am fine.”

“No trouble. I will make you coffee anyway. Sit in there,” she points to a small living area where the old man reads a paper. There’s a crème-corn colored couch that Thomas sits in across from the old man in the chair. He lowers his paper and the man, whose face looks to be peeling, whose hair is a greasy gray and black, just nods and smiles and says something in Swedish and then, when Thomas makes clear there is no hope for conversation, goes back to his reading.

“My mother is asleep,” Hilma says, bearing two saucers of coffee and dish of butter cookies. “And my father is at work. You said you were here from Poland?”

“Yes,” Thomas says, politely taking a cookie. “I saw the name Mikael Joselewicz in a cabin there. I am trying to track down an artist. When did your mother come to Sweden?”

“I think in ’45. She doesn’t like to talk about it much, but her and a few others went here after the...” Hilma searches for a word in English and cannot produce one, “...the camp. She isn’t my mother, not really, but my stepmother.”

“When did your father marry your stepmother?”

“Oh...uh...” Hilma smiles embarrassingly, “I don’t remember. I think it was ’47 or ’48. Her first husband, Mikael was...uh...hit.”

“Hit?”

“Yes. By an um...train. They were not married very long.”

“And she has no other sons or daughters?”

Hilma shakes her head, “Not without my father. She has me, daughter, and sons,” she motions to the two young men in the kitchenette listening the radio, “And these are hellions from my aunt,” when she says this she reaches out for one of the small children and squeal of laughter goes up as Hilma tussles the child’s hair. Thomas sees Anna, briefly, six months pregnant across the Atlantic.

Thomas explains that a Russian family contacted him specifically about a painting they owned that they had in storage. It was brought over to Russia by their ancestors. They sought out him because they are hoping, praying, that he will buy it and sponsor them to migrate to the United States. He has not told them (and he doesn’t tell Hilma) that he thinks this request is impossible. He doesn’t have the heart to bring it up with them. The two of them nibble butter cookies for half an hour until Hilma risks waking up her mother. After a few moments, a woman

with the first shocks of grey streaking through uncombed black hair, tired face, the same sort of hard looking skin that the cold winds in Scandinavia seems to produce on every face, comes out a back room. She wears a knitted afghan and sleepily yawns as she makes her way to the bubbling pot. Hilma speaks to her in Swedish. The woman eyes Thomas and doesn't say anything for a while. Thomas tries to introduce himself, but the woman just nods politely.

As the hours go by, Thomas thinks of leaving, but every time he gets the courage to call it quits Hilma asks him to stay a little longer. More coffee. More biscuits. He cannot refuse. It is the most *home* he has felt in weeks.

Then, the old man goes into another room, the little boys are picked up by someone that is not introduced, and the two young men leave. Hilma goads her stepmother and then tells Thomas she doesn't speak English.

"That's okay," Thomas says, "You'll interpret?" he asks Hilma.

"Yes," Hilma says, "Her name is Gerda. That isn't her Polish name. She and her husband changed it when they reached Stockholm," Hilma confers with Gerda, "Yes. Her old name is Graznya. She wanted a new name for a new life, I think."

Gerda says something and Hilma nods diligently.

"What do you want to know about her husband, Mikael?"

Thomas skirts around the cabin at first. He learns that Gerda and Mikael were married in a Polish ghetto and were separated when they were moved to Auschwitz. She shows Thomas the numbers on her forearm. He knows it is a tattoo, but they look burned into her skin. After the camp was liberated they headed north. They had no real home anymore. Most of their life had been destroyed by the Germans, and then the war. Thomas pauses often. He lets both

women gather their thoughts. Every answer to a question seems impossibly difficult to remember. Thomas then mentions the cabin and the journal and her husband's name. Gerda takes in each word from her stepdaughter carefully, and then Hilma interprets in the same careful manner...

"We had been traveling for twelve days, sometimes getting rides from passing Soviet troops, but mostly just heading north, blindly. There were seven of us. Mikael had made himself the leader, so to speak, of our little group. He was the only one with a weapon. We arrived at a village, but it had been burned almost to the ground..." at this Thomas's eyes open wide, if it was Prafta, the village had recovered much more than he had supposed, "...and while some of us found a bombed out building to rest in, Mikael decided to search the mountain and came back saying that there was a cabin that looked unoccupied. We gathered what small things we had and followed him. What I remember was thinking the cabin seemed so small. No one could possibly live there for long before going crazy. There was a little garden on the side that looked like it had not been tended for a long time, but wild roots still grew there. I went with Mikael to the door. He had his pistol out. First, he knocked. Then, when there was no answer, he tried the door. It was tied off with a length of rope. And as he was going to cut it with a knife, a man's voice called out, *I am a leper*. It was a low and raspy voice, but seemed unsure of its own power, like the words were buried. Mikael said that we were simply seeking shelter and food and company. The voice said, *I cannot undo the ropes. I do not know when they were tied*. Mikael told him that he would cut the rope and open the door. The man, whoever he was, apologized for his appearance before we even saw him. When the door was opened, I am ashamed to say, I was startled and shouted out. He was..." as Gerda tries to remember she tears up and Hilma slides her a small napkin, "He had nothing left. The face was hardened, no nose, no lips, it was a wonder he could speak at all. The eyes were still there, but filmed over and white. His hands,

most of his fingers seemed to be gone, but the rest of them were almost merged with the flesh of his hand in a claw. Even as I recall it now, it seems impossible. Mikael, he showed no sign of disgust, he asked the man his name and asked if they could stay with him, outside, or if he wanted company. I think, after what we had seen in the concentration camps, this man didn't frighten Mikael."

"He told you his name?" Thomas presses.

"Yes. He said his name was Timon. He didn't say much else. I think he found it hard to speak at all. We stayed with him that first night. I do not..." Hilma has Gerda repeat what she says three times, "I do not know how the man ate or slept or moved. We stayed outside of the cabin and we did not wish to disturb him in the night. I remember waking up and thinking I saw Timon in the window of the cabin, some shadow moving around, but..." Gerda shivers and laughs at herself, "I think maybe it was my imagination. The next morning we tried talking with him some more, but he only said he was a leper and he didn't know who we were, and he seemed to get upset that we were even there. Then..." as Gerda begins to remember she starts to cry, lightly, "I wanted to help him, so I touched him and helped him move around. He was so light I could carry him in my arms. He kept yelling, *I am a leper. I am a leper*. There was no inflection in the voice, just him repeating the phrase. I wanted to wash him and asked Mikael to get a bucket that was in the cabin and bring back water. He came back with nothing. He said that there was an old riverbed, but it was dried up," Gerda takes her stepdaughter's hand, "I was really frightened then. I did not know how...?" Hilma tells her stepmother that they can stop, but she insists on continuing, "On the second day I sit with Timon, this man, in the garden. I compliment the horseradish, the squash, the leeks, and he says he doesn't remember when they were planted, and he doesn't remember the names of the vegetables, and he asks me my name. I say, *Graznya*. We sit there for hours, in that little garden. Then he asks," Gerda squeezes

Hilma's hand, "he asks me, *why did you throw yourself on the fire?*" Gerda begins to really cry, "I am angry. I saw bodies burn. I saw limbs burn. Some of my friends..."

"I'm sorry," Thomas tries to get up from the kitchenette table, but Gerda moves her hand from her stepdaughter's to his, "You don't have to talk anymore, Gerda. We can end this here." Hilma agrees, but her stepmother continues to talk and cry.

"I was angry, but I knew he didn't know what he was saying. He was old. Senile. I kissed him on his head and left him there in the garden and, that night, we discovered he had died. Mikael and a few of the men buried him near the cabin. I have not told anyone this story until now."

They sit in silence for a few minutes. Thomas thanks Gerda and Hilma sees her mother to bed. When she returns, she is quiet and nervous. She places her hand on Thomas's arm and thanks him. It was important, she says, for her mother to tell the story

## **Part Four**

### **A Painting in One Hundred and Eighteen Parts (Limited Showing, 2011)**

***Untitled*** (unknown)

Mixed Media on Cotton Fabric

181 x 263 centimeters

**Unknown**

Polish, 1600s?

In 1992 I was present when the Art Gallery of Ontario presented Pablo Picasso's layered paintings in which was displayed the radiological images of his recycled canvases. Two images, sometimes

three, stacked one on top of another of where the maestro painted over his failures. I found the show to be reaching, a bit trite and unrevealing. It is no revelation that artists, even the brilliant ones, reuse their materials. It is in that spirit that one might approach the Met's latest limited offering of a single painting, dissected into parts, one layered on top of the next in black and white radiological readouts. It sounds cold. Medical. Something you might crawl across in SoHo or the Village, but not the Met.

When I enter the gallery and flash my credentials to the young man overseeing visitors to the showing he seems distracted. He tells me that a tsunami has struck Japan. Thousands are dead. He says that his brother is teaching in the Iwate Prefecture and has not managed to call home. I tell him he should take the day off, but he says he needs the money. I offer to at least buy his lunch, and amid his protest, I tell him my job really isn't that hard and what else is someone with an inflated sense of self-worth supposed to do? When the dining room brings me the grilled octopus with promise of crab cakes to come, I slide the dish to the young man. I've always found the food at the Met ghastly, not in keeping with the company on its walls, but I steel my taste buds, pick at the tentacles and share a meal. I ask about the painting.

It was found in an old gallery in Lower Manhattan. They were clearing the space out for the inclusion of what I am told will be a midnight cookie delivery service that will do wonders for the community. In the basement they found this old sheet carefully rolled up in canvas. The owner of the gallery, Thomas Milquist, died in '73. I vaguely remember the man, and may have gone to some early showings in his gallery when I considered myself a very important artist. From what I know, the gallery fell into disrepair after Milquist's death until it was repossessed by the city. Several establishments popped up in its place, including a porno bookstore, a music repair shop, an obligatory café and another art gallery in 2002. The sheet was turned over to several art appraisers and dealers with the collective opinion that it was worthless. The young man who tells



me all this shows me a photo of the painting that is on the pamphlets the Met has created for the showing. It looks worthless. A disgusting cacophony of colors.

The young man has asked me to include the name of his brother in this publication:

Harry Roundtree

If any of you well-read American ex-pats in Japan have any information regarding Harry please contact your local consulate.

The gallery is calling this showing, "A Painting in One Hundred and Eighteen Parts." A laborious mouthful and without even entering the gallery where it's displayed one already feels a great chore ahead of them.

When you arrive in front of the Met's Special Exhibition Gallery you are given a choice to view the painting first, and then work backward viewing each layer as it decomposes into a blank cotton sheet tacked to the wall, or to view it chronologically as each layer is added, one by one, until you arrive at the final destination of this strange almost queasy amalgamation of parts. I decide to work backward. The attendant hands me headphones for the audio accompaniment, which I will not summarize here, only to say that the radiological recovery of art is as boring as it sounds.

The original piece is kept safely behind glass. My first impressions are the same as my peers who deemed the painting worthless. There is no discernable form, technique, or style. Thick globs of paint peek out from other seemingly random sources. The last layer applied looks to be an azure blue which has overcome the top and drips down the sides as if the painter wished to make a sky, but beneath it is a world of chaos, no order, one hundred and eighteen separate images in which only a few can be seen: The half-face of a woman, a wayward limb, and the unrefined touch of shadowy forms. Nothing is clear. Nothing has a purpose.

As the decomposition begins, I should note that each layer is displayed as an x-ray on a slate. This removes the color, but the Met's restoration artists have provided a facsimile of each layer and point out the intricate details (or clumsy details) of each one. I will not attempt to describe all one hundred and eighteen pieces, but will give you my general impressions.

I think most of us want to go back. We want to relive maybe some time in our life when we were happier, or correct some regret. There was a certain party in 1989 I wish I could travel back to that would have propelled my career in a different direction – not that I'm not happy now – but there are sweeter things we muse on in the company of *what ifs* that continually play out in our heads. I am on Layer 101 when forms begin to take shape hidden beneath all the thick, occluding pigment. I find myself drifting. I see the x-rays laid out on slabs and I am quietly separate from the woman next to me, who stares at Layer 100 in that uniform way I've seen so many museum goers stare. I have time to think. I begin to uncover things in that quiet. Maybe it's not a product of the painting itself, or the gimmick of the audio in the headphones relaying the intricate process of radiological archeology, but the scope of these one hundred remaining parts in uniform progression. The placards are brief – *Here we believe a bird. Here it looks as though an arm folds into itself. Notice the flames. Notice the woman on the flames. Notice a finger bent, as if in prayer.* They are guesses. They are guessing a great deal, making summations out of Rorschach tests. If you stare long enough toward what is supposed to be the end of a long process, you find all kinds of things that no one can notice except for yourself. I am now on Layer 100. The placard reads, *Notice the application of the paint by hand – the impressions have led forensic scientists to believe the painter had only three fingers.* I look at my own fingers. I imagine my pinky gone and then mimic my flowing hand up and down against the air. I feel silly. The woman ahead of me, now on Layer 89, states that she knows me. She saw me on a morning television show talking about Pre-Raphaelites and the paintings of the Romantics. I smile and nod. She asks me what I think of the

one hundred and eighteen layers. I have no real way of categorizing it, not yet, so I ask her the same question. The layer she is looking at, Layer 89, she says the plumes of white against black that come from a mound, perhaps the shape of animal or hill, reminds her of a burning horse. Such a specific image, I can't help but ask her why. This woman, Elizabeth, she says when she was a child her father put down a horse with his gun and they had to burn the body. The x-ray is memory for her. I do not see a burning horse, but privately I do see something. As we make our way through the gallery we do not talk again. Halfway through the images and the technique begins to refine, as if snow from a snow globe is starting to settle and you can spy the little house and the little tree. It's here that I stop and lean against the interior wall that's been draped in black cloth. I let others pass me by. I am still not sure what's in the x-rays, even if the lines are drawn with more purpose, even if the placards point out severed limbs, hairs, eyes, toes, I am still struck by its apparent need to not placate the viewer's gaze, objects floating in space. I see things more now, as we go backward, I see it is 1984 and I am scared. I look at Layer 51 and I am a younger man and I am scared because we are burying people, friends, lovers, from a discriminating epidemic. Layer 51 is Baltimore in 1984 and the shadows are the dying, and there's a swirl of white that comes up that tells me that I will survive, but by Layer 54 I will be gone. I begin to encounter those who started the Layers from the beginning, from the blank sheet, and they are piecing together each part, where there were no eyes, where there were no flames, where there were no burning horses. They pick out something new and quietly awe at their own small discoveries. For them, the image becomes unclear, unfocused, uniformly opaque. In regress I see the bent form of a man, Layer 26, and my father is home from Korea in 1953 and I spy him quietly staring at the pinstriped wallpaper in our kitchen. I am sixty-six years old and I have no way of asking my father how many friends he lost. I can see the exit. I can see the blank white sheet. Layer 1 is a cat's body haloed in red. The placard reads: *curiously, panther blood was used*

*to create this first painting.* I linger there for a while. It's not that it's particularly well done, technically it is a mess, the proportions are off, but I am not ready to leave. I go over the regrets again. The mistakes. The loss. I cannot confirm in the eyes of those staring blankly at this bloody cat that they are feeling the same thing. But a few, including myself, stop before the exit, turn around, and try to piece it together again.

*A Painting in One Hundred and Eighteen Parts* will be displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until March 31<sup>st</sup>.

END



