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Gestalt

Anton Petrov

On n'aime que ce qu'on ne possède pas tout entier.
~ Marcel Proust

The demons lurked just beyond the shadows; rapt by an impenetrable ocean. You couldn't see them in the dark, but they were there. You couldn't hear their silent screams of torment past. They squirmed and contorted their naked bodies tirelessly; inching towards the light but always just beyond its reach. They were forever condemned to remain in the abyss. A dark and gaping abyss from which nothing escapes and where nothing is forgotten. In the blackness. Just out of sight. Of course, most people didn't notice them. They would walk right past wearing their blindfolds, completely oblivious. It's incredible how little one can see if one chooses not to. But, if you were especially observant, you could even make out the scars carved into the essence of the void itself. A wound in the nothingness.

The smile was deceiving. It was deceiving because you saw nothing else. The tortured way she gripped the side of the bench. The deep and distressed breath she drew just before time froze. The way her eyes didn't look directly at you, but at the last moment glanced slightly to the left. The petite, cold bruise on the inside of her thigh. But most importantly, the sweet and seductive smile distracted you from her vacant and hopeless stare. A stare that did not express any particular emotion, but rather a complete

lack thereof. A stare that did not focus on anything in particular, but rather dissipated into nothing. A stare that can only be articulated by a person who has fallen out of love with their first and only love. But when you finally saw those eyes, you could never look away. They were overflowing but hollow; kind but apathetic; honest but betrayed; innocent but molested. They engrossed you and captured you. Once you saw them, they were etched into your very soul. They absorbed you. They were not in pain; they were simply disinterested and dull.

The young woman herself was dazzling. Ghostly white skin, luminous blonde hair, marvellous posture that exaggerated her subtle chest, and demonic blue eyes. She wore a loose-fitting white dress that the wind was assaulting. The vines in the foreground reached out towards her. The stones at her feet were drenched in light. The brushstrokes were gentle and ambiguous. Each individual stroke was torturously light and meticulously positioned. Every minute detail was visible. The lines were a little too perfect and she a little too pretty. She was almost surreal. Indeed, the brushstrokes probably made her prettier than she actually was; but they could not embellish everything.

The sun at her back hung peacefully and calmly from the sky, as a soul engulfed in rapture. Utterly tranquil. Suspended in the air, seemingly daydreaming. Though I suppose the sun can only ever daydream. It sat there in the distance, surrounded by stars but completely apart, completely solitary, completely companionless, completely alone. To pass the time I guess I, too, would daydream. But of what did it fantasise? Probably the same thing we all fantasise about: Death. It is dying so that we may live. The violent and volatile nuclear fusion was barely noticeable. We never notice things when they're dying.

Hours passed as I stood contemplating her, and she me. This was the third day I had visited her, or perhaps the fourth, or fifth. The security guard had to usher me out each day, and each time he did I was left with a yearning emptiness. Even when I was away,

she was all I could think about. I felt closer to her than any other thing in my life, but I always kept my distance when around her. She intimidated me. I stood patiently and watched her. A chill ran down my spine and then straight back up. I felt the sun in the window behind me. The warmth was soothing and enlivening against my iced skin and her icier eyes. I turned briefly to look at it. The star stayed unreservedly motionless and quiet; as if it did not care that I stared at it quite impertinently. I turned back toward my enchantress; the blue dot on the girl's face gradually faded into that haunting smile. Her eyes made contact with mine, just for a second, but a second too long, before again glancing to the fabricating left. I needed to be alone with her.

A young couple casually approached the girl, stood in front of her for a while, commented on the masterfully light brushstrokes and how pretty she was, and continued on their way, completely and shockingly unmolested. It was a surprisingly accurate description of the painting, considering they did not actually look at it. Perhaps they had just read the gallery handbook. The female of the pair looked suspiciously like the girl in the portrait. They held hands as they blindly led each other through to the next room; the Rococo room, I believe. The girl in the painting still clutching the bench, ever so tightly.

The guard gently touched my arm and pointed towards the door. I looked behind me; the sun had completely set. The tender glow of the sun had been replaced by harsh and clinical electronic lighting. I felt a little abandoned. I gave him a fifty-dollar handshake and he exited the room alone. I looked back towards her. That mysterious and unbefitting smile. Lisa! Why was she smiling? What was she smiling about? Was it a polite gesture? Was it convention? A disguise, perhaps? It was such a delicate smile, showing no teeth or gums. Such a contradictory and complex smile, and yet so careless. I had not quite finished my over-obsessing when I was rudely interrupted.

'He told me to smile.'

‘And why did you obey?’ I responded.

No answer.

But what right did she have to not smile? This was, after all, the artist’s tour de force. It was the artist who immortalised this young woman with his talents and effort. Perhaps he wanted to paint a portrait of a smiling girl, rather than a frowning one. I suppose she may have even been obliged to smile for the artist. And indeed, why not smile in your portrait? It’s perfectly natural and perhaps even expected. If all other portraits were of smiling men and women, why not this one? Or, perhaps she had even forgotten how to frown.

‘You can approach me, you know.’

I cautiously took a few steps forward before pausing. She did not move, neither encouraging nor discouraging me. I inched ahead. The words on the plaque below her read: ‘*Still Life with Girl on Bench* by an unknown artist’. I stole a few more centimetres until finally I had reached the rope barriers. Without looking back, I carefully stepped over them; no alarm sounded.

As I approached, I noticed her complexion begin to fade. Where from a distance she appeared brilliant and animated, closer up she somehow lost her vibrancy and appeared rather dull and broken. Her smile was suddenly not as saccharine, though her eyes remained just as ghoulish and dead. As I approached, I noticed the seemingly radiant painting was covered in a thin layer of sickly dust, and the pigments were beginning to fade. The paint on the canvas was arid and parched and cracked. The left corner had sustained some water damage. In some parts the paint was powdery and friable and flaking; in others the varnish had disintegrated, leaving the paint exposed. The canvas itself was fragile and warped and torn around the edges.

I worked up the courage to dare pose another question.

‘Why can no one see you?’ I asked hesitantly.

‘Because all paintings are the same,’

I didn’t quite understand what she meant.

'But they see nothing,' I retorted.

'They see nothing they like, and so they can see anything and everything'

By this stage I was right in front of her. She would have felt my breath, if she could feel anything at all, that is. She was still avoiding eye contact, devilishly. We were so close and yet forever out of reach.

'Why did the artist tell you to smile?' I asked.

'Because he committed suicide soon after he painted me.'

I turned and looked back into the empty and hollow night sky.

'You must be cold,' I said.

No response.

I pulled a cigarette out of my pocket and lit it. I looked back. She was now looking directly into my eyes, unblinking, unwavering. I was lost. No, I was captured. I didn't know where I was or even who I was. I could hear nothing, but see everything. Winged beasts surrounded and clawed at me, their screams still inaudible. They tugged at me and breathed on me, with their hot smoky expirations. They motioned for me to escape, but instead only drew me in further. Deeper into the detested, dark, blood-drinking pit. The sweet and innocent smile slowly transmuted into a smirk.

The fire brigade arrived much too late.



Anton Petrov wrote this in 2014 as an accountant in Victoria.