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WASHING CLOTHES IN THE RIVER

A shaft of pallid light from the setting sun fell across the room and splashed the painting above the dead fireplace. Dale studied the canvas. It was a large one, signed and dated 1953 by Henrik Madsen. A brass plate at the bottom of its beat-up frame identified it as "Washing Clothes in the River."

The painting showed a stream that emerged from behind a tall cut of bank on the right, flowed lazily down in a widening S and then splayed out at the bottom of the frame. The water was a dozen shades of blue and textured with what could have been scales. From a slight elevation the viewer looked across the stream to a group of four women kneeling on the spit of land at the lower curve of the S. Each woman was bent to the task of washing clothes.

When they hung the painting over the fireplace Betsy told Dale that it was a good example of impressionism. She pointed out how it didn't have the snapshot quality of a naturalistic painting, and it wasn't wild beyond identification like some expressionism could be. She said impressionism offered a softened but heightened view of the world, one that was easy on the eye and mind.

The colors in the Madsen painting were certainly easy on the eye. There were the soft blues of the river, sky and the farthest hills, and muted greens and browns between. The spit of sand the women occupied was tan running to ochre; the banks of the river were ochre running to umber. Countless shades of green wove through the brown to render trees, brush and grass. A broad tree stood on top of the bank to the right, and at the left and center were mounded fields marked with lines indicating agriculture. The blue mountains beyond the marks of man were lit from above by a line of luminosity that shaded from pearl to streaked cerulean.

The dabs and strokes that made up the landscape were kind of feathery, so the women stood out with their sharper definition. Their clothes were a richer color than the surrounding earth tones, and their hair was black, which raised the question of what location the painting showed. Madsen had been born and trained in Denmark, but he traveled in the south. The dark-haired

women suggested a Mediterranean setting. Betsy thought Greece or Spain.

Two of the women were bareheaded and one had a white cloth laid over her hair. The fourth, the one nearest the viewer, wore a wide-brimmed straw hat. The upstream women were lumpy and rather thick, but the one in the hat had a nice figure. Her pink skirt and white blouse showed off an ample breast, thin waist and smoothly rounded hips. She was the most shapely woman in the group, and the only one doing something besides washing.

Betsy said once that most great paintings contain an element of mystery. She said no matter how well crafted a painting is, if it doesn't engage the viewer it's lifeless. And the best way to engage is to include some unexplainable detail. In Madsen's painting that detail was the woman in the hat. She was bent to her washing like the others, but she was the only one looking away from her work. The brim of her hat was angled in a way that showed she was looking upstream. That was the painting's unexplainable detail. The lines of the hills rounded down toward the riverbed, the river flowed to the bottom of the frame, and the women did their work. Everything was explained by the rules of gravity and function, except for the cocked head.

And Betsy was right that the detail engaged the viewer. She and Dale had spent hours speculating on why the woman was looking sideways. With her face turned away it was impossible to tell whether she was talking to the other women or looking past them. Betsy tended to think that she was gazing at the faraway hills and dreaming of escape, but then one summer afternoon Dale took her to a place that looked a lot like the scene in the picture. They drove to a creek that was on a ranch where Dale used to work. The spot was so far back

in the sticks that no sound of civilization reached them. They spread a blanket and picnicked on apples and wine, then they skinny-dipped in the clear water and afterward made slow, wordless love. Betsy's exhalations smelled like honey and Dale took them in osmotically along with the insects' pulsing song. The next day Betsy thought the woman in the painting might be looking upstream expecting her lover. She pointed and said he could be just behind the cut of the bank there, just about to step into view and . . .

Dale shut his eyes so he wouldn't see Betsy standing at the fireplace and pointing at the canvas. He shut his eyes but then she appeared on the side of the road, smiling in through his window the first time he passed her in his truck.

They were re-topping a section of two-lane country road with asphalt, and she was working as a flagger at one end of the construction. She sat in front of a curl of orange traffic cones that snaked off into the distance to block the lane being repaired. She looked comfortable, reading a book in a lawn chair with a bright orange parasol over it. A walkie-talkie rested on an ice chest at her side. When it came time for her line of traffic to move she responded to the call on the radio and then stepped on a foot pedal. The pedal was part of what seemed to be a homemade device, tall, with a Stop/Slow sign at the top. She mashed the pedal, the sign flipped from Stop to Slow, and she waved the traffic on.

Dale rolled past slowly, so he could study her. He saw that she was petite and wore her reddish-blond hair tied into a ponytail at the back of her yellow hardhat. She smiled at the passing vehicles from beneath her wraparound sunglasses, and when she turned the smile on Dale her freckled nose seemed to crinkle with glee. He heard a little gasp in his throat.

He made sure he was at the head of the line when he passed the construction site the next day. He drove out of his way to get there, and he pulled over to wait a hundred yards away from the girl he'd been thinking about all night. After she let a line of traffic go past he punched the gas.

He lowered his passenger side window as he eased to a stop in front of her. She gave him a polite smile and turned her attention to her book. He figured he had only three or four minutes, so he got right to the conversation. He asked what her book was about. She looked at him and laughed.

"That's not what you *really* want to know."

Her direct manner put him off balance, but he recovered pretty quickly and said, "You're right. What I *really* want to know is what color your eyes are under those glasses."

She told him to guess and he asked if they were both the same color. She laughed and said maybe, so he began going through color combinations. They grew wilder and wilder, and he was up to chartreuse and plaid when the first car in the line of traffic coming from the other direction passed him. She asked which eye was plaid, the real or the glass, and he said he'd like to find out over dinner. She considered, then gave him her name and phone number as she hit the pedal to switch her sign from Stop to Slow. He dug frantically through his glove compartment for a pen. The car behind him honked while he wrote on his palm. She laughed and told him to move along.

On their dinner date the following Saturday he learned that her eyes were green, and she was twenty-three, nearly five years younger than he was. He also learned that she earned about what he did doing his carpentry work. She said he should become a flagger, then to his surprise she called two days later with the offer of a job. He was going to phone her to ask her out again

anyway, but he wanted to wait a decent interval so she wouldn't know how crazy he was about her. And then she called and said they needed a flagger on the road crew.

He was working as a temporary at the carpentry, so he took the new job, but he was tired of it after just one day. All he did was stand around and hold a stick with signs on the end. He would stop traffic or wave it past as the roadwork allowed. It was boring work and harder on the feet than he would have thought. The only good thing about it was being able to talk to Betsy in short spurts on the walkie-talkie, and then at length in person after work. That night they went to dinner again, to celebrate his first day on the job. In the middle of the meal he told her that it looked like his career as a flagger would be a short one. He said he'd go nuts just standing around, so after the restaurant they went shopping. The next morning he reported to work with a chair, parasol and ice chest. Later he built a pedal-powered sign switcher, and then when the weather cooled he bought a heavy poncho and two thermoses—one for coffee and one for the soups Betsy liked to cook.

His stomach growled at the thought of soup. He shifted in the stretched-out recliner and adjusted his lap blanket. The living room was cold. He pulled his robe closed at the throat. Evening was coming on and he was still in his pajamas.

His stomach growled again. He knew he should eat something, but lethargy pressed down hard. It crushed his chest, mashed his lungs, and pushed his spine into the depths of the recliner's padded back. He strained both will and muscle to throw off the blanket and pull himself forward to a sitting position. Then he fought to slip on his house shoes and rise to his feet. The lethargy changed from a hand pressing down to a hand blocking his way. He struggled against it step by

heavy step.

He started to switch on the light in the kitchen but decided against it. He was able to see well enough by the fading glow coming in through the window at the sink, and he didn't want to look at the pictures lurking on the walls. Each held a memory. He searched for a plate among the dirty dishes on the counter.

As he made a cheese sandwich he remembered how, by the time their first job ended, he and Betsy were in love. By the end of the second they'd moved in together. And they were working steadily. Betsy was well established with the construction companies, and they liked it when she began pitching herself and Dale as a team. The road crews rarely made it through a job without having to replace a flagger or two, so they jumped at Betsy's offer when she said she could deliver two for the duration. The jobs went so well that before long she was able to get the companies to conduct bidding wars for their services. Plus there were perks, like cash bonuses and Christmas turkeys.

Dale returned to the living room with his sandwich. He set the plate on the table beside the chair and allowed the hand of lethargy to press him back into a reclining position. The shaft of sunlight from earlier was gone, and the Madsen painting was muddying into obscurity. So was the one at its side, the Thorvald Larsen. But Dale didn't need light to study that one. Like the Madsen it was one of the originals and he knew it well.

He closed his eyes and thought of Betsy moving in with her paintings. They hung them here and there on the barren walls of the old farmhouse, and in explaining them to Dale Betsy infected him with her passion. Over the next three years they collected paintings and the walls filled with framed canvases, to the point where frames

butted together everywhere.

Betsy liked landscapes. She said, "It's like the *picture* frames are really *window* frames that open onto other parts of the world." Dale agreed, so they searched for landscapes in thrift shops and at estate sales, but mostly they bought online. They never spent much on a piece, rarely more than a couple hundred dollars, and most of the online purchases came from Europe.

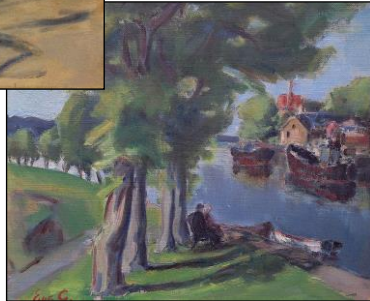
They focused on Scandinavian painters from the middle of the twentieth century. Betsy said they seemed to value light more than other groups, maybe because it's so thin and precious in the north. Dale noticed that a lot of the work done by the Scandinavians had a twilight quality. Even when they painted the tropics, the scenes often seemed lit by winter sun coming from a great, slanted distance.

Betsy was especially fond of the Larsen, a big painting of a barren marsh. It was overwhelmingly brown and naturalistic, and when you looked at it you could almost hear the plaintive cry of a solitary tern.

The painting below it was another of her favorites. It was by Anders Olson and she said it bordered on expressionistic. Olson had sketched out a country lane lined with trees, and then with heavy brushwork he carved suggestive patterns into the trees' puffy springtime growth. Either he was trying to express something inside himself, or something in the painting was struggling to be seen.

The most striking of their expressionistic paintings were the two by Ewald Grauengaard. They'd picked them up from an online art dealer in Denmark. They weren't dated but both were obviously from the same period in the artist's life. As soon as they cut them free of their exotically postmarked shipping carton Betsy began calling them "the blue one and the tan." Both showed

scenes along a canal of some sort, but the important features were the trees. They were old and gnarled, and Grauengaard's thick brushwork gave their trunks a muscular quality. Betsy said once that he left behind some message with the paintings, a statement that whispered from between the canvas and the paint. It had something to do with the will to life and the strength of the ancient trees that refused to fall.



They hung the Grauengaards in the bedroom, side by side on the wall across from the bed so that Betsy could see them first thing in the morning. Sometimes she'd linger at them after rising and study the details—small boats and a red roof in the blue one, and people walking along the canal in the tan. The walking figures were small and hard to make out, but two of them wore what looked like nuns' wimples, the white ones with upswept sides. Seeing the nuns always made Betsy smile, and one bored Sunday Dale made her laugh when he gelled her hair to give her wimple wings.

Dale came out of his reverie and found that

he hadn't touched his sandwich. He wasn't hungry. It was completely dark in the house, so he felt his way to bed by the light of memory. He kicked off his shoes, dropped his robe to the floor, and crawled under the covers. He didn't bother to set the alarm.



When spring came the immobilizing depression thawed a bit, and he finally felt like doing something. He wasn't up to being around other people, but fortunately he still had some money left and didn't have to be. While the money lasted he would work on fixing up the old barn that was behind the house.

He planned to store the paintings in the barn. During the winter he'd begun placing sheets and towels over the canvasses, but covering them didn't diminish the feeling of loss. In fact it did the opposite, so he was going to move the paintings out of the house. The old tack room in the barn would be the perfect place to put them once he'd made some repairs.

The fix-up work was just what he needed. He turned his thoughts outward to measuring and fitting, and the more he sweated the more his frame of mind improved. But then one day he went to buy some lumber and drove past the scene of an accident on a county road. It must have happened a few days before. He slowed his truck and looked at the gouges in the asphalt. They led in a long curve to a scorched area on the road's shoulder. Spray painted hieroglyphs tracked the scars into their next incarnation as paperwork.

He thought of the autumn day that he and Betsy were working a mile-long repair job on a different county road, a winding one without much traffic. To kill time they joked on the walkie-talkies. They needed each other good-naturedly, tit for tat, until Betsy shrieked with

what Dale assumed was laughter. He felt bad for kidding around on the company's time, so he didn't call back. He poured a cup of coffee and sat watching the leaves fall.

Then he heard sirens at Betsy's end of the construction. He waited for her to call and tell him that emergency vehicles would be doing a priority pass-through, but the call didn't come. And the sirens stopped. He tried to raise Betsy on the radio but she didn't answer. He tried again, and again, and then suddenly he knew. His truck was at her end, so he took off on foot. He ran the whole mile and got there just in time to see them roll her covered body past on a gurney. They lifted her into an ambulance and drove off, without the siren, and Dale looked at the gouges in the asphalt. They curved past Betsy's crushed lawn chair and down the bank of the road to a car nuzzled into some trees. Peels of rubber from a blowout were mixed with Betsy's strewn belongings.



Dale came home with the lumber, wore himself out working, then dropped into bed. He fell asleep immediately but soon roused again in what he knew was a dream. He was in the Madsen painting, on the riverbank, and digging into the tall cut of dark dirt. The woman in the straw hat was approaching. Her sandalled feet made little splashing sounds in the shallow water. Her face was turned away in the picture, but Dale saw it fully as she came toward him. She was quite attractive, with sharp facial features tanned to a rich bronze color.

She stopped when she stepped up onto the taper of sand that led to the dirt bank. A strand of black hair fell across her face. She brushed it aside and regarded Dale with dark eyes.

"Hello," he said, but she didn't respond. He wiped sweat from his forehead and asked if she

spoke English. She made a pinching gesture to indicate a little bit.

“Where am I?” Dale asked.

The woman thought for a moment, then answered in halting English. “You are . . . Crete.”

“Crete,” Dale repeated, looking around. “Mediterranean, like we thought. So you speak . . . is it Greek?”

“Greek. Yes.”

He pointed downstream. “I’ve seen you around the bend there, washing clothes in the river.”

“Yes. I am . . . there always.”

Dale waited for more, but there wasn’t any so he looked at his immediate surroundings. Some tools for digging were scattered on the sand, and a contraption for sifting dirt straddled a pile that was the color of the bank he’d been digging into. Several piles showed that he’d been working for a while. He was sweaty and his clothes were soiled. His once white shirt was especially dirty.

The woman stepped to a large book that was spread open on the ground. She knelt down and looked at a picture on a page. It was a rough drawing of an object that was next to the book.

“You . . . draw this?” she asked Dale, and he guessed that he must have. He stepped closer to look and saw a sketch of a pottery shard. The woman flipped pages, past other drawings of more pottery. The objects depicted were scattered around the book.

The woman paused at one drawing and studied it. It was a picture of a hand from a small clay statue. The fingers clutched something but Dale couldn’t make out what.

“What is that?” he asked. She looked at him and he imitated the clutching hand. “What is it holding?”

“It is, um . . . fidi.” She made a wavy motion with a hand and forearm. Dale didn’t understand

until she added a hiss.

“A snake,” he said.

“Yes. Snake.” She swept her arm at the river. “This river . . . is snake in hand.”

“Hmm. So you’re saying that the snake in the statue’s hand is symbolic of the river?”

The woman gave him a blank look.

“Sorry. Hand holds snake, snake is river?”

“Yes. One thing . . . is another. River always moves . . . like fidi. Some say river is tears. Gift of gods, to wash past so we, um . . .”

She made the moving snake gesture again and then acted out peeling away skin from the arm and hand.

“It helps us shed the past,” Dale said. “To wash it away.”

“Yes. So it not hold us. And one thing is another . . . in all.” She spread her arms wide. “In world. In us. I look at you, see eye, like window. And I see chest, with shirt on it . . . dirty, dark, like shroud. So I say, ‘Heart inside is sad. That shirt need wash.’ Hmpf.” She looked at the river. “With me it is wash. Always. That is all I know.”



The money ran low by the end of the spring, so he took a break from working on the barn and returned to the carpentry jobs. Being around others bothered him at first, but the buzzing of the saws and the pounding of hammers was familiar and he settled into things.

Eventually he got to where he could go out with his co-workers at the end of the day. He went with them to poolhalls and saloons to keep from thinking about Betsy, but when he came home he still had to deal with the paintings. He hadn’t transferred them to the barn yet. Most were covered, but that didn’t stop them from being a reminder.

And then one night he came home and saw

that a thumbtack had given way on the Madsen painting. The covering sheet hung down on one side of the frame, leaving the canvas exposed. He moved a floor lamp close to it and sat in the recliner. In the quiet night he stared at the painting, to refamiliarize himself, though he didn't need to. The scene was a part of him. He felt himself nodding off. He was on the hill overlooking the river. Water bubbled past below and insects droned in the distance . . .

Orange light brightened behind his closed eyelids, and he felt the temperature rise on his chest. He'd removed his shirt and was flat on the hillside with a cushion of grass beneath his back. He started to open his eyes but was too comfortable, too content. The orange light dimmed as clouds closed over the sun again. He felt himself drifting back to sleep.

"You return," a voice said.

He sat up and saw the woman in the straw hat coming toward him up the hill. The other women were still on the spit of sand behind her. They worked at their washing without looking up.

Dale's shirt was beside him on the ground. He picked it up and started to put it on, but the woman said, "No. It is dirty." He looked and saw that it was. It was filthy, from the digging he supposed, and his pants and boots were dirty as well.

"Do you want to wash the shirt?" he asked as the woman came closer.

She stopped a few feet away and swept a strand of hair from her eyes.

"It needs washing," she said, "but *you* will do it." She seemed more sure of her English now. "Tell me about what happened up there." She gestured upstream and made a hooking motion to indicate beyond the bend.

"You mean the digging, from last time?"

“No. From the other time. With the picnic.”

Dale didn't know *how* she could have been aware of his picnic with Betsy, but that's what she was talking about. Or was she?

“I'm sorry. I'm not sure what you mean. What picnic?”

“The two of you ate, and swam, and . . . other things. You were very much in love. Tell me.”

So she *was* talking about the time with Betsy.

“Yes, well, I don't know how you could know, but . . . yes, we went on a picnic once, in a place like that up there. Her name was Betsy. We worked together, and we collected paintings together . . .”

He told Betsy's story, from her cherished paintings to the spray paint that marked her death. He talked about the picnic and how for three years they shared her honeyed breath, until the day his throat choked down, blocked by panic as he searched the silence at the other end of the walkie-talkie. And he still couldn't breathe, not fully. He was afraid to. It was like he was holding the last living piece of Betsy deep inside himself. It had been entrusted to him in that final shriek of astonishment over the radio, and if he exhaled he would lose her forever. He would still have the picture of her in his mind's eye, but whatever lived beneath the surface would escape.

As if awakening from a fever he came to. He sat up and saw that he was alone on the side of the hill. He felt tears running down his cheeks and used his shirt to wipe them away. The shirt was dirty, but after he wiped the tears he saw that it was clean. It had turned bright white.

He looked at the spit of sand across the river and saw that the woman had returned to washing clothes. He was about to call out to her, but he stopped himself when she cocked her head to look upstream. She seemed to be waiting for somebody else to come along.

He slipped his shirt on and took a deep breath. He didn't know whether it was the last breath of an old life or the first of a new, but it felt good.

