

THE BEHELD

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It was December and the city was cold. Gardner had asked Elisabeth to accompany him this trip, so that they might be together during the holiday season, so that they might have something to consider apart from loss. Elisabeth had never been abroad, and so greeted his invitation with a peal of joy. Yet, since arriving, she had been at times somber.

As they walked, her gloved hand nestled in his bent arm, the wind pushed around them in dull bursts, causing Gardner to grip the brim of his hat with his thumb and forefinger. A gray sky stretched over the low buildings of the central city and darkened toward the distant horizon, which lay somewhere beyond the confines of the metropolis. White flakes of snow began to drift around them, materializing, it seemed, before their eyes. The snow collected slowly in the crooks of the avenue. Its gentle onset caused Elisabeth to unfurl her umbrella. Gardner tested the buttons of his overcoat. He felt a flake adhere to his moustache. He retrieved his handkerchief.

It's lovely, said Elisabeth, and she meant the snow and not the handkerchief.

Indeed, Gardner replied, dabbing at his face. Come, Mrs. Gardner. We're almost there.

Yes, of course.

He tucked his handkerchief away and put his hand over hers. I'm glad, he said, that you decided to come along.

Elisabeth smiled. I hope I won't be in the way of your business.

Elisabeth. You will not. The business is done.

The flakes swirled around them, stuck to the shoulders of his coat. She brought her arm around so that a portion of the umbrella might cover them both, but Gardner shook his head.

I have my hat.

Elisabeth said, This umbrella. Its frame is not made of wood. Have you noticed?

He looked up at the umbrella frame, spread like the points of a star, and above it the dark material that stretched to collect the precipitation. He nodded. It's baleen. Which comes from whales, as you know.

Oh, she said. She squeezed his arm. Imagine! Do we have such a thing in New York as a baleen umbrella?

Gardner smiled. Yes, he said. I suspect that we do.

They might have taken a carriage but their rooms were only eight blocks from the Hotel Drouot, where he had been chasing the Clermont-Tonnerre lots at the Sonmerre Sale. Elisabeth had not come along during his visits of the previous days, although he'd insisted that she was welcome. He'd thought she might like to see what he did, how he did it—how he analyzed the worth of each work of art, how he fought for the best items in the bidding. The excitement when he came face to face with a real treasure, and the measure of satisfaction, by no means small, that he received upon securing his most desired pieces. He thought he might share those things with her. Instead, she had chosen to stay in their lodgings with her books, a small box of which she'd purchased in New York for the voyage. Gardner had not been insulted when his wife chose to stay behind. The rooms were comfortable. Yet he'd been concerned. She seemed to be drawing into herself once again.

Then again, Elisabeth had always been a voracious reader, since well before Gardner first learned of her from his cousin and came to leave his card in the warm gaslight of her parents' front parlor. Her parents who still distrusted electricity, its steady incessant light burning beyond their understanding. The work of spirits, they said, and so he had first seen her smooth skin lit by flickering orange, her slight, retiring smile, the way she looked carefully at him and then away. Foremost there had been this about her—that they could talk about literature, about history, about the news of the day. That she was a woman whose intellect met—and probably surpassed—his own.

I recall, said Gardner, that you have been reading about whales.

I have, Mr. Gardner. You remember.

He did remember. Elisabeth's box of books had contained several works of recent decades, among them one of Melville's later follies. Every night, as they lay in their cabin waiting for sleep—as the boat rocked around them to the dull Atlantic and the hull vibrated quietly with the rhythm of the engine—Elisabeth whispered to him the details of whatever she'd read that day. She began this ritual with the ocean passing, probably to quiet her nerves. Gardner found it soothing. Yet, since their arrival in Paris, the summaries had ceased. Elisabeth had patronized some English-language bookstores—French literature, she said, was simply too decadent for her taste—and now she was spending time with a book she'd picked up while shopping. Gardner did not know it; it was new, and it seemed better suited to children, but Elisabeth had been taken with it from the moment she opened its cover. From what she told him, the book concerned a little girl lost far from home, and this troubled Gardner. However, he let her read what she saw fit. He had his work, and it had to be done.

In the block before the rue Drouot, they moved past a wall coated in neat squares of newsprint. Gardner had passed the posters every day for three days; he had seen their doppelgangers around the city. The carefully arranged blocks of paper were full of dense black text, advertising the OBJETS D'ART and ANTIQUITÉS currently available in the Sonmerre Sale. Now the fat white snow stuck to the surface of the papers and, though the text was coated with protective oil, Gardner could see that here and there it was nonetheless beginning to lose its shape.

Elisabeth must have noticed the same thing, or at least the weight of snowfall against her umbrella, for she said, How ever do you keep the works protected in this kind of weather?

They crate them, for shipping, Gardner replied. It's very safe.

At the rue Drouot they rounded the corner. As they did so, a group of children pushed around their legs, a swarm of small bodies, scruffy hair and chapped hands, caps and scarves. He felt Elisabeth's intake of breath more than he heard it. The children were there and then they were gone, but their laughter remained, echoing off the cold walls and the cobblestones, taking on the increase of volume that seemed always to come in the hush of fresh snowfall.

Elisabeth said, They are dear.

Gardner nodded and clasped her hand.

On the rue Drouot there was activity. Horses pulled carriages, the wheels cutting lines through the newly forming layers of snow, the clop of hooves echoing off the street. Men crowded the sidewalk, moving, presumably, to and from work or lunch, their coats wrapped around their torsos, their hats pulled firmly against their head. The snow swirled in the sky and the strange music of many overlapping voices speaking the same alien language came in waves to Gardner's ears. The smell of smoke was there about them in the air and the suggestion of warmth emanated from the doors they moved past. An empty storefront was

plastered with the propaganda of the anti-Dreyfusards—still active and fervent, Gardner noted, despite their humiliation of the previous year.

And then there was the Hotel, the stout, square building with its octagonal corners and its own complement of newsprint plastered across the façade, the mesh of text advertising the public auction taking place inside. Once they'd reached the shelter of the canopy that extended over the main entrance, Elisabeth closed her umbrella, shaking it gently, and Gardner brushed the snow from the shoulders of his coat. Then they stepped into the foyer and checked their belongings. Inside there was a clammy kind of warmth and the smell of charcoal. Gardner could feel his cheeks flush. He looked at Elisabeth, watched the faint hint of color as it returned to her pale skin, and, regarding his wife in the gaslight that lit the foyer, found something inside of him stirring.

Even in the entrance hall, the low, breathy sound of voices hung around them like insects. Gardner extended his elbow and Elisabeth took it, and they moved to get in line for the lift. Gardner said, We might have taken the stairs. I wanted you to have this particular distinction.

After several minutes of waiting, the iron gate slid open, and with a polite smile the operator gestured for Gardner, Elisabeth, and the three men behind them to get on board. He pushed the gate shut once more and pulled a gilded lever. The lift rumbled slowly to life and began its ascent to the exhibition floor.

See, now? Gardner said to Elisabeth. This platform is thirty years old. Can you believe it? You are in fact riding on the first hydraulic service elevator to have been installed in Paris! He looked at the operator. Isn't that right?

The operator nodded. Oui, Monsieur.

Well, Elisabeth said. It's a marvel.

One of the men behind them, a portly, clean-shaven fellow, spoke up in heavily accented English. And it is not even the new thing. They have, how is this, a stair that works with electricity. I have seen it myself, this past summer, at the exposition. Surely you attended?

Gardner replied. No, unfortunately. We have just arrived from New York.

Ah! exclaimed the portly fellow, and he clapped his hands together as the lift slid open to reveal the second floor. Well, perhaps someday such a thing will even reach New York! He bowed clumsily in the tight space, allowing Elisabeth and Gardner to step out of the lift ahead of his party. Then the man and his comrades pushed out and around them and were soon absorbed into the bustle of gallery patrons. The gate closed and the lift began to descend. Elisabeth smiled broadly and leaned into Gardner's arm.

What a charming fellow, she said, with amusement, and a hint of the sarcasm he so loved.

He was thrilled to see her that way, smiling easily.

There were a multitude of rooms in the exhibition, and they were crowded with people there for the final days of the Sonmerre Sale. The walls of each room were cluttered with paintings in gilded frames, a near fantasia of color and form, and the floors were lined with glass cases full of drawings and sculptures and fine ceramics. Gardner moved with Elisabeth through the milling crowd, stopping periodically to indicate items he had secured for his clients back home. She nodded at each and congratulated him on his victories. As they moved, he identified noted socialites in the crowd, and told her what scandals he had heard about them. He pointed out works by famous artists, and taught her to spot the Commissioners of the Hotel in their red collars with embroidered numbers. They stopped at Elisabeth's impulse as well, so she could admire a particular piece, or a detail thereof—be it a pattern in a portion of chinaware or the contrast of color in a landscape. Gardner was

pleased to allow her these diversions. It was a day meant for diversion, and he had wanted her to come along just so she might be engaged by things of beauty.

The previous afternoon, when the sharp, cold air only hinted of snow, Gardner had finished his business early and managed to retrieve Elisabeth from their rooms. They walked to see the new train station, and then over to the River Seine, and there Gardner spotted Paris's iron tower. The concierge at their lodgings, an older man with a whiskered mole, repeatedly called it Eiffel's Malady, but Gardner thought the tower stunning. He pointed it out to Elisabeth and she nodded.

I've been reading about it, she said. It was meant to be temporary, did you know? And here it is, standing, more than eleven years later. One wonders how long it will last.

As long as it wants to, Gardner replied. That's what I think.

And now, in the Hotel, he brought her into the seventh room of the exhibition and stopped her in front of the painting he most wanted her to see.

It's a Vigée-Lebrun, he said. Do you know her?

Of course.

Then you know she was an Elisabeth, just as you are.

At this, Elisabeth smiled.

The painting was housed in an elaborate gold frame. Its canvas depicted a man in a powdered wig and military regalia, which included a shocking blue sash across his chest and a bright red bloom of ribbons for his medallions. He sat perched on the edge of an elaborate Versailles chair, his legs crossed awkwardly, as if he had started from repose too quickly. He wore an expression on his face that floated somewhere between seriousness and playful insouciance, and with his right hand he gestured toward the beholder, forefinger extended, as if ensnaring them there to instruct them on his opinion. Light fell on him from above,

catching the cranial ridge and illuminating his wide forehead, and the whole of him hovered against a background of rich green—a wall, perhaps, or a curtain, or maybe even nothing more than the color itself with the man cast atop it.

And who is being depicted? asked Elisabeth.

This is the Comte de Vedreuil, Gardner replied. He was himself an art lover.

And you'll be sending it to America?

He nodded. All the way to Virginia. The family wanted Marie-Antoinette. This will have to do.

And will it? She crinkled her brow. Will it do?

You know the sort of people who ask me to represent them, Gardner said. They don't know much when it comes down to it, but they wanted something of the French aristocracy. The Southern pretense to nobility, I'd imagine. These Virginians are saturated with it. So, if the Comte de Vedreuil is not Marie-Antoinette, he is still a Versailles noble. Gardner put his hand to his mouth and coughed, then continued. He was about as promiscuous as the Queen, so there's that to speak of. And look at the composition of the work—much more exciting than in the other Vigée-Lebrun pieces. I do anticipate they'll be happy.

Elisabeth leaned into him, as if sharing a secret. And, Mr. Gardner, how much did it cost, if you don't mind my asking?

Gardner, agreeing to the pretense of secrecy, cupped his hand at her ear.

Elisabeth straightened up. Oh my. She looked at the painting and at the man in his golden chair. Well. I suppose a real aristocrat, such as this one, ought to be worth that much.

They were quiet for a while. Gardner took Elisabeth's hand and the crowd bustled around them. As they stood there in front of the Vigée-Lebrun, as he regarded the figure of the Comte, and as the Comte seemed to regard him, finger wagging instructively, Gardner

knew there were things he wanted to tell his wife, although he was unsure quite how to do it. So, when it seemed like Elisabeth was ready to move on, to examine the rest of the exhibition, he gripped her hand firmly, indicating he wanted her to stay in place. She looked at him, questioningly. And he began. He said, I want you to look at this painting.

I have been looking at it, she replied. It's a man in a chair.

This made him smile, even though there was something quaking inside him. He released the pressure on her hand but kept his fingers interlaced with her own. I think it is almost as if the man in the chair doesn't matter, he said. In truth, he is dead. He is gone from this world.

Elisabeth said nothing. She looked not at her husband but at the painting.

It is the artist who matters, I think. And that is what I want you to know. There was quite a war for this item, but I fought for it. Because of the artist. Because of who she was.

Elisabeth said, What do you mean?

Gardner felt the words come out of him. They sounded correct. This painting, as you know, cannot be ours. We will return to New York, and I will ship it to Virginia, and the family will hang it in their parlor or somewhere similar and we will not see it again. Yet today it is ours. It is mine, because I have won it. And I sought to win it not because such was my mandate but because it was made by an Elisabeth, and she was strong, and she was talented, and she was very smart. She gave very much of herself to the world. And that makes her very much like an Elisabeth I know. He gripped her hand and turned to look at her. That, Elisabeth, is about what I mean. Then he smiled, and kept his eyes on her, awaiting her response.

She looked quickly at him, and then away. It reminded him of her parents' gaslit parlor, her shy glances in his direction. Why, Mr. Gardner, she said.

He gave her his handkerchief.

They moved through the rest of the exhibition and then descended by stair to the first floor. Gardner stopped by the offices briefly, to ensure once more that the works he'd purchased would be crated and ready for the trip across the Atlantic by the time the holiday season had ended. The clerk, in his dark suit, waved his hands dramatically and assured them everything was in order. Gardner collected their coats, and then he and Elisabeth stepped back onto the street to discover Paris covered in a delicate white layer, with the soft snow continuing to fall from a sky deepening toward evening.

At dinner that night, Elisabeth was mostly quiet. They had filet mignon and wine. They read for a while by the fire, and then extinguished the lights, put on their nightclothes and got into bed. Gardner lay beside his wife. For the first time in days he tried to summon the sensation of the steamship that had carried them across the ocean, the comfortable rattling of the hull and the feeling of the Atlantic rocking them gently to sleep. After a while, he turned on his side, to face Elisabeth.

Elisabeth, he said softly.

Yes?

Tell me about what you're reading. The newest book.

She shifted under the coverings, so she was facing him. Why?

Because it's not about whales.

No, she said. It's not. It's about a girl.

She was quiet for a time.

Go on, he said.

There's a storm. And the girl gets lost. And when she wakes up she's in a whole new strange world.

Gardner closed his eyes. What he saw was a girl, laid out on the cold stone of the table in her fragile white dress, and behind her the darkness of night being chased away by a brilliant white light.

Elisabeth continued. There's a wizard she must find, this girl. And an evil woman who wants her. There are friends as well. Magical creatures. It's very nice. These friends decide to help the girl find her way home. That's about where I am. They're on a journey, so that the girl can find her way home. So she can return to her family. And here she stopped, and in the dark Gardner listened to the sound of her breath and knew that she was crying.

He opened his eyes. Elisabeth.

I'm sorry, she replied.

He put his arm around her and pulled her to him. She buried her face in his shoulder. She cried as long as she needed, and the tears came hot through his nightshirt. When she had finished, and was breathing more regularly, he kissed the top of her head.

They lay like that for a while, her breath against his shoulder.

Elisabeth said, You must think me very foolish.

No, he said. You should be happy. We should be happy.

Around their chamber lay the quiet of winter and the quiet of night.

He said, Upon our return we shall do something about it.

She shifted, placed her hand gently against the back of his head. Are you sure?

He nodded in the dark. Of course.

So it was decided, in December of 1900. Sometime later they were asleep.