

Matisse, in the Jardin des Tuileries, 1904

by Joe Kapitan

I.

The World's Worst Mime stood there next to the iron carousel, portraying something, and the crowd understood none of it, except that whatever thing he was trying to portray was not being portrayed well at all. This is what you get, they laughed to their children, when you do not follow rules. There are things that cannot be self-taught.

At that time, there was talk of a deaf-mute who sometimes frequented the same spot, unschooled in any language of symbols, motioning uselessly to passersby. The gendarmes watched him from a distance. The deaf-mute had taken to smearing his face with white paint, they said, and that alone had saved him from a cell at the Ste. Agnes Hospital for Mental Deficients.

Henri was just a boy then. He couldn't have been expected to notice that both men never appeared in the gardens on the same day.

II.

One Sunday afternoon, the young Henri sat with his grandmother on a wooden bench near the carousel. His hand held tight a string tied to a large helium balloon. The balloon was red, redder than heartblood. Look, said the grandmother, The World's Worst Mime is Climbing a Ladder. The World's Worst Mime was indeed clawing at the sky with his fingers, gasping, trying to find a foothold in air. No, said Henri, he's Drowning in People. Against his grandmother's protests, Henri stood and approached the man and extended his clenched fist. The World's Worst Mime bent over, took the balloon, then shot up straight, smile splitting make-up, stretching cloudward until his joints began to dislocate. His last was by far his finest performance, and yet no performance at all, because the essence of

him was already gone over the carousel, past the ragged tops of the elms, headed north toward the specks of color that were families picnicking along the banks of the Seine.

The applause subsided. The gendarmes rushed to the limp figure of the mime, face-down in the gravel.

You have an artist's eye, Henri, said the grandmother.

III.

Henri, now grown, placed his easel in the shade near the carousel and began to throw color at the canvas in the way that the notes from the calliope fell against his ear.

A crowd gathered to mock him. World's Worst Painter, they said, have you taught yourself? This was before anyone in Paris had heard of the Fauvists, let alone the Cubists. Henri had arrived a bit early. Genius, ahead of its time, dressed like insanity.

Henri did not bother to speak to the crowd, which made the mocking that much worse. He became The World's Worst Mime Painter, and still Henri did not blame them for their ignorance. How could they be otherwise, when they were cursed with such misunderstanding faces? So white they all looked, standing there. So balloonless.

