

In Search of Vince's Quinces

by Quirina Roode-Gutzmer

Axel, shrouded in bathroom fog, stands naked, whilst an ordinary day dawns in Dresden. The city is bustling with commuters. The snow is molten and the odd blossom of Snowdrop dares to open.

A fresh scent of shower gel slices the dank air. Beyond a veil of condensed steam on the mirror appears an image of a man, whom Axel is not sure he wants to know. With fists clenched and the fleshy parts of his palms, he wipes the cool glass with slow deliberate strokes that squeak. He stares at the brown eyes, trying, but failing to discern the pupils from the irises, which were like coffee, he thinks, unfiltered, and seemingly bottomless, perhaps even bitter. The sallow wall behind him subtly mocks his melancholic expression, which Axel considers with disregard, because knowing it, feeling it, this amorphous sense of unease deep within every fibre of his body, was enough, perhaps even too much. But still, he tries, and struggles to identify this face as his own.

Long locks of raven-black hair, strewn with metallic shades of steel and platinum, here and there, no longer frame his face. No longer is his face tanned, nor stubbled. Beneath stage lights is where Axel's face always came to life, where he sang, spoke in many a tongue or slang, metamorphosing himself into so many human forms. He remembers fondly enacting Mephistopheles, Woyzeck and Fallada's Little Man—the height of his career only just having begun. His face bared and dared the slap of disagreement, but also smiled in the glory of hands clapping. His was also a face that inhaled, that imbibed in the company of peers and friends, and glowed in the light of oil burned through many a night.

But now, he looks at a hairless skull, a pale shade of skin, too smooth to shave. He runs his fingers over his bare scalp and over a long row of bold metal staples that close a hole in his head just

above his right ear. His head had been shaved, drilled, sawed and cut open until something sinister was found and removed from his brain. Axel adjusts a wig of grey hair, long enough to cover his ears and neck. He needs to have the wig for two reasons: one, so as not to look like a neo-Nazi skin head (under no circumstances!); and two, so as not to be recognized by the art-gallery staff (who knew him better than he wanted them to).

He was not even supposed to be at home. Had he not broken into his flat now, he would have been lying in a metal bed on white sheets, eating a bland breakfast, in a place preoccupied with Kafkaesque protocols.

The coffee table in his flat stood piled up with empty beer tins and pizza boxes from the night he spent with his friends, his last supper before his medical ordeal. The sink brimmed over with dirty dishes, all the ones he owned.

Standing on his balcony, Axel fumbles with a packet until he has clutched in his dithering hand, a cigarette. He hadn't had one in weeks. He shouldn't. His lungs looked like tarmac, but who cares now? The flint flicks and the tobacco smells sweet, and glows. Axel puts the lit cigarette to his lips, draws a long breath, pouts his lips and blows the smoke out like a whispering whistle. His eyes pierce into the distance. The landscape looks like a vine-charcoal drawing with soft contrast, naked winter trees, silhouetted black against mist that hung like smoke, silent and cold, between tree-lined hill steps of depth into the horizon. In the foreground the fields merge from ashen grey to a muted green before his eyes. Beautiful, he thinks, as he taps the ash of his cigarette over the balcony, but this is not good enough.

"I demand colour," he says out loud.

"Especially yellow."

He scrapes the old mouldy coffee grinds out of the aluminium espresso pot and begins to grind, by hand, some coffee beans. It crunches as he turns the handle, round and round, releasing the fresh aroma. He can't help himself and immerses all his fingers into

the soft, moist, brown fines, holding them under his nose, almost in his nose, with his eyes closed, almost snorting it up.

While the espresso pot heats up on the stove, he excavates the frying pan out of his sink, and washes it in his bath tub (because there is no space to wash it in the kitchen sink and because he is not going to wash anything he does not need), and starts frying a whole packet of expired bacon, and afterwards three eggs, also expired. That isn't very German, the breakfast, but it is what he learned to enjoy while studying at film school in London. He arranges the fried eggs on a plate, breaks open the yolks, which dribble, rich and saffron yellow, all over the plate. He crumbles Zwieback on top, as a substitute for bread, and then sprinkles the browned bacon bits. He smacks his lips as he eats and licks his fingers as he finishes.

He puts on his favourite black leather jacket, the one that Steffi had given him years ago (the most favourite girlfriend he ever had). When the Berlin Wall came down she got into her uncle's plastic car, a little champagne-coloured Trabant with purple spots from acid rain, and drove all the way to Frankfurt.

"Weil ich es kann," she had said. "Einfach so."

And she ate bananas all the way, because there weren't any in East Germany during Stalinist rule.

Axel intends, without further delay, to feast on the textures and the colours of the only Van Gogh painting in Dresden.

"Because I can," he says to himself. "Just because."

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With an air of nonchalance Axel walks past the security guards at the New Masters Gallery in Dresden. They scrutinize him, but with apparent unfamiliarity. He walks past more stern faces, those belonging to the parents of Curt Querner in dark oil tones on plywood. Theirs had been a silent world, which was probably why Curt spoke in pictures. How different, Axel wonders, would his own life have been had he been deaf. Because if he were, he would not have had a phone to his ear that night when a hurricane

thunderstorm raged. Lightning crackled in the earpiece. He wanted to hang up, but somebody (who? He cannot recall) kept him engaged in unpleasant rhetoric. Then there was an almighty loud clap in his ear and blue sparks sprayed out of the phone. He wonders if this caused the tumour.

Axel hovers past a ghost-like woman holding a young child painted by Otto Dix in 1921 and then another painting of his, massive and gruesome, called "War Triptych"—an oil painting of mixed technique on plywood in four parts, together, almost like a cross, capturing the mechanised and chemical warfare of World War I: The left panel, soldiers with gas masks and steel helmets in the morning; the middle, the afternoon, when mutilated and decomposed bodies lay in ruins amongst abandoned gas masks, blood, and a skeleton with a wicked grin, poised on the branch of a burned-out tree looking upon the dead; the right panel, the evening, the aftermath, a survivor, ghost-like, almost resurrected from the dead—this man looks the beholder of the art in the eye with an intense insistence, almost saying:

"Look what you have done."

The bottom panel was a night scene, resembling what looked like people hiding in trenches or bunkers, or were they dead and buried in graves?

Axel's eye then catches Wilhelm Rudolph's textured rusty reds and burned blacks of ruins and rubble of an incinerated city, of Dresden, against an ashen sky laced with visible paint cracks. Axel's face contorts in agony as he summons to his mind what he had learned from relatives, what he had read about what happened to Dresden on the night of 13-14 February 1945. Prior to that Dresden's cultural splendour danced in stone—Bach fugues of Silbermann-organ tone—on Baroque rooftops, and below sheltered were thousands of refugees, women, children, civilians, wounded soldiers and prisoners of war. When the defenceless city was swollen to the brim with people, the city shattered like porcelain into a million burning pieces—a bomb was dropped for every two people in it. Each bomb made a fire and each fire fused with another fire until

there was an inferno—a hell on Earth—a kiln that burned live human bone into ceramic and every form of flesh to cinder. The firestorm sucked air like a vacuum, flinging people from far away streets, to feed itself, and stole the last lung-bursting breath from those people who took refuge underground.

Axel remembers that he would not have come to be in this world had his grandmother, holding his mother as a baby in her arms, not heeded the warning from a soldier, who spoke in broken German and told her to leave Dresden, because it was going to be destroyed. She believed him.

For a while, Axel finds relief in Caspar David Friedrich's painting "Das Große Gehege". The composition lent the painting a view of Earth as though one was on its edge, above it in outer space. Below the sky lay water in puddles, like mirrors, like large flat droplets of quicksilver spread out over the convex Earth. The dusk light mesmerizes Axel, the gold of the turmeric, liquid in the sky, balm to his ravaged mind. Axel passes the kitsch "Cross in the Mountains (Tetschen Altar)" to stand for a while admiring the "Bohemian landscape with Mount Millerschauer": The rolling green hills with forests here and there, just like in Saxony, he thinks, except that two hundred years later in Saxony such a landscape is not without its tall and slender smokestacks (made of mostly red-brown little bricks and painted with strips of red and white blocks so that the aeroplanes can see them). A hundred years ago, the tallest thing that scraped a sky in the world was one of these smoke stacks not far from Dresden. Now the Saxon landscape is punctuated with wind turbines, which just look like flashing red lights at night. Axel amuses himself with the differences between Bohemian and Saxon landscapes. Every square centimetre of the German landscape is *aufgeräumt* (tidied up) and *in Ordnung*: winds in fields are broken by perfectly lined trees of the same kind, equally spaced, of the same height, whereas in Bohemia, the assorted trees, probably mostly self-sown, stand scattered out of line ... in fractal harmony.

Axel's mind drifts back to the Große Gehege and he thinks about Kurt Vonnegut, who was held captive as a prisoner of war

there during the bombing of Dresden. His book "Slaughterhouse Five" lay around, well-thumbed, in the commune, where Axel had stayed in London as a student. His English was only just good enough to read this novel. Perhaps circumstance made it possible, for he found himself commuting underground, feeling like an anonymous ant, never ever seeing the same person twice, each person either thumbing a phone, or their ears plugged into noise, or reading. To avoid locking eyes with a stranger it was more comfortable reading about the bombing of his home city. And that is because of the way Kurt wrote: If satire was a pair of pants, Kurt designed it, (the world even labelled it), and he wore it, and by the seat of it he told us of our mortality, and our morality, mocking it and exposing the truth of human nature with penetrating sagacity.

Desperate to change the tack of his thoughts away from the bombing of Dresden, Axel manages to associate the slaughterhouse with the Neue Messe Dresden, which it is now part of, and where recently Axel tasted, in a commercially united and peaceful Europe, samples of balsamic vinegar, one with cranberry and the finest, extra, most virgin olive oil offered by natives from Mediterranean regions, purple onion jam from Sicilian matriarchal mothers, pickled cherry peppers from Bulgaria sold in Poland, watermelon salad with vegetables coated in chickpea flour deep-fried by people, who are vegetarians in order to fight for human rights, but was Axel too late (?) because he had already eaten Highland beef salami, its soft room-temperature flavours melting on his tongue. Then he saw and touched and even tasted a sample of a high-quality dark-chocolate model of the Frauenkirche (which was bombed to bits). How stubborn thoughts are, he thinks, back to the bombing again. How symbolically weird this is, to demolish a building of such stature with ones teeth and then to glory in the taste of it. Right at the end, before he left the exhibition centre that day, he had a Turkish coffee, brewed the Arabic way with spices harmoniously blended, the solo notes of green cardamom and black pepper, carried perfectly by an orchestra of other spices.

Axel awakes from his reverie when his scalp begins to itch. No amount of wig rubbing relieves the relentless prickling. The security guards, or are they the thought police—the Stasi, he wonders, consider him with suspicion. Someone is watching him all the time. He struggles to keep them in his peripheral view. As he approaches his goal he would need a few minutes of not being seen. Just a few minutes.

He stands by Edgar Degas' bronze sculpture of a little ballerina, serenely poised and sure, her tutu looking so texturally tantalising. He aches to feel the fabric of her frock. With intense refraining he holds his hands behind his back. In this moment the silence in the gallery suddenly shatters in shards when Axel hears the cling clang of metal echoing in the distance, where somewhere outside the gallery in the inner old city of Dresden workers were hammering steel on stone, setting new cobblestones. Still today the city is being rebuilt after being bombed to rubble. Back to the bombing again, he thinks, will we ever forget? Axel reminds himself again as to why he was here: to see the Van Gogh painting.

He floats past Max Slevogt's desert paintings of fluid sand colours, contrasted and textured, only sparingly, but effective. He recognizes the painting of Paul Gauguin that he had seen prints of so many times in his life, and here was the original: two Tahitian women on a beach. The Van Gogh painting has got to be here somewhere, he recalls from his last visit to the gallery. Axel's fingers start itching for Van Gogh's textures and his eyes tear up in Pavlovian anticipation for the feast of colours so close up. His fingers, restless, crawl under the wig, scratching his scalp until it burns, until the pain overwhelms the tingling itch, almost, but not quite quenching it. Axel leans forward onto Paul Gauguin's painting. Just as he wants to reach out to the painting the squeaking shoe soles of a security guard walking close behind him screeches in his ears. As Axel hears the squeak drop in pitch to a Doppler bass tone creak, he becomes horrified at the smooth amorphous glass surface between him and the painting—a barrier, rendering the painting as common as the thousands of prints of it and preserving this triviality.

Then at once the fleshy fruit of peaches from another Paul Gauguin painting, glowing all kinds of orange made his mouth water, but the peaches were behind glass twice: once in the jar in the painting and again by a sheet of glass, separating Axel from the art world by being denied palpable access. He moves to the next room in haste. He knows that soon he should find Vince's quinces. Instead he finds himself mingling with Saxon bourgeoisie. He feels his primed senses being wasted staring at the cold image of intellectuality, of a baron, Carl Ludwig von Küster, with his crown of hair, receding hairline on temples, and spectacles on a distinctive and noble nose. Axel imagines him to look just like John Lennon. That is much better now, he thinks. And to his left Axel can't help being drawn to the lips of Marie von Schönberg, who resides in an oval frame, very becoming, her grey eyes serious and thoughtful, quite similar to the baron's, but those lips, he thinks are much more intriguing than that of Mona Lisa's. Her lips desire to confide something secret with such an incredible urge, but they reveal only that they will be sealed, and remain silent. As Axel averts his gaze from Marie's lips, he realizes that he has reached the end of his gallery sojourn and that he has failed, for he has been through the entire gallery, and has yet to meet Van Gogh on canvas.

Axel's scalp hurts, from the inside and the outside. Raw on the outside from scratching, and yet still itching, he can hardly bare wearing the wig much longer. The rich textural tones of Vince's quinces echo in his mind—variegated, deliquescent, succulent—they beckon him. His time is running out. A gallery official is only seconds away. He turns on his toes until he sees one:

“Where is the Van Gogh painting?”

The official smiles at him and says, “That painting has been lent to a gallery in Ottawa.”

The disappointment, brutal, and almost impossible to contain threatens to send the veins in Axel's head into spasm. For fear that the security man may either recognize him or suspect that he may be a thief of fine art (a career in another life, he teases himself), he shuts up and walks on. He sees the security man leaving the room,

his shift ending and being relieved by another security man. The security men chat for a while. Axel's fingers reach underneath the wig. He vacillates between decisions for a few split seconds and eventually flings the wig in a far corner. He promptly places himself in front of a large painting by Max Slevogt, "The dancer Marietta di Rigardo"—she has an enticing presence in this room, he says to himself pleased, his curiosity whetted, and there is texture and there is yellow, but no Van Gogh, no more time, and no other choice.

In a moment of not being watched and no longer caring to be watched, Axel presses just the tip of his nose an atomic layer from the painting, to smell the painting. Musty, but as though this painting has absorbed countless scents for the last hundred years, many of them in a private collection, brushing shoulders with paintings from French impressionists; Cézanne, Monet, and Renoir; and even the Dutch impressionist Van Gogh (this was as close to old Vincent Axel was going to get). Which people have seen these paintings, smoked cigars around them? All that is left now is a mildewed ghost. Axel turns his head, with his cheek almost touching the painting so that he could hear the painting. With outstretched hands, he places all his finger tips on the painting, and like a blind man reading braille, he explores the texture of oil paints on canvas, smooth and thin in the background, and rich around the frills at the bottom of the flamenco dancer's dress, sweeping across the Persian rug. As his fingers get lost in the fabric of the frill, he hears Moorish quarter notes trill as fingers tremble tremolo on guitar, metal and nylon. Axel opens his eyes, which were now bathed in the glistening glow of golden lemon—cadmium yellows—and shades of lapis lazuli and frosted cerulean cobalt blues, darker on the edge of the frills. The colours are fluid now, brighter, as though light is shining from it. He smells the colours, the oil of linseed and the pungent scent of turpentine. Marietta di Rigardo lights up, rich, and exploding with texture and colour. Axel hears the brush strokes wet on wet, sweeping passionately on the canvas. The background darker, thinner and smoother, details waived by Max's paintbrush. Axels' fingers melt with the burned siennas and umbers of the Persian rug

as he swims into the moment, at first viscous, and then thinned into the background towards the empty chair, where he chooses to sit and puts on the hat that hung from it. On the floor, he moves the flowers gently to the side so as not to step on them. He merges into the mood of the flamenco moment, this juerga, with three other men in the background; one playing the guitar, one singing and the other clapping hands. Axel's eyes become transfixed onto the dancer.

As the fingers of the guitar player quiver, stroke and percuss on nylon, metal and wood, a Farruca song fills the room just like the smoke, and every other finger and foot in the room thrum, tap and move to this melodic rhythm, igniting a passion that flows like electricity from the tips of toes that tap all the way through foot arches and ankles, legs, and especially female hips and waist that cannot help but sway, through to shoulder blades, arms, palms and fingers, until the skin on the scalp tingles with pleasure. With intense and precise footwork, Marietta swiftly twists and turns her body, swirling the train of her dress like long tail feathers of peacock plumage. The bottom frills of her dress swirl, her arms and wrists stir the air as graceful as a bird. She taps her shoes to the rhythm of the clapping hands and Farruca guitar-beat. Her golden yellow scarf looks like wings that she whirls like a matador, lifting and falling in circles. She is a bird, poised and proud, and Axel feels like he can fly. His mind floats on her wings. From the vantage point of a bird's eye, Axel notices a bald-headed man—outside, with his face pressed on a window, licking the glass like a frenzied man trying to drink the amorphous frozen liquid, his eyes transfixed onto the dancer. Axel sees how two security guards handcuff the man and how they take away the body from a man, so it goes, against his own free will.

The End

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