

Five

by W.F. Lantry

And that was but one, there were many more fluttering in the corridors, in the stairways above our heads as we descended, too many to count. Constance wanted air, and to be away from the wings. The back door hinges needed oil, and the spring resetting, but the wind was light on her hair, and she seemed more comfortable by the pond, on the bench, in the shade.

"So what happened to the last girl?" she said.

"Which?"

"The penultimate woman."

"It all began with a painting," I said. "Mostly blue. Acrylic. Naturalistic in a modern sense. She was stylized but recognizable, and her breasts were exposed. Everyone could see her disordered skirt. The painter was a fan of Herrick. She swore her posing sessions had been the picture of modesty, but her fiancé was suspicious. All her onlookers simply assumed. No one saw it before the evening of her vernissage.

When I arrived, just a little late, people were crowded around the painting. She was standing alone, on the other side of the gallery, wearing the same skirt, now ironed, but this time with a blouse, some kind of silk I hadn't seen before, sheer in some ways, but thick enough to prevent comparison. The painting's left breast had a beauty mark, or perhaps a mole, it was hard to tell as the buyers circled it. I idly wondered, half aloud.

"You could, of course, directly inquire," she said. "The undoing of a single button would provide sufficient evidence. Or you could ask the painter himself, who has mapped the particular landscape through the repeated explorations of his eyes. They seem to linger there as his brush crosses the canvas."

"One needs to leave some space for Art," I said. "Or room for the artist to remake the world. Perhaps he simply wished for a universe in which such a mark could exist, or would invariably exist in just that place. In the alternate realms of string theory, dark matter

provides elegant explanations. But even those are not as elegant as the way that pearl button of yours is lightly held in a loop of blue silk."

A red dot had appeared on the painting's card. On that card, and no other. It was as if she herself were being bought, rather than the art, the vision of her, and not the painter's vision. Her eyes looked back at the circle of viewers with a soft ferocity, almost a dare. One of them, holding a cane, was raising his voice. He forcefully attempted to place his black dot over the red. I suspected the knob of his cane was glass, rather than a faceted gem. It prised a rainbow of gallery light whenever he raised his voice.

"That is not 'Figure 27 in Blue!'" he said. "That is my soon-to-be wife! Who among you thinks he can purchase her?" With each word, his cane rose a little higher in the air, its prisms dancing light spirits on the walls. The painter cowered and began to retreat. I had to step between them.

"Master yourself, my friend," I said. "This is no place for a cane. And I promise you: I paid my own niece to pose for this portrait, before she went off for her studies. I intend to hang it in my library. That is my own dot which yours has covered. The image is not of your wife."

"But the skirt!" he said, pointing, and glancing back and forth between canvas and woman. "The blue skirt, which she has since ironed..."

"Off the rack from Bergdorf Goodman," I said. "They must have sold two score. I bought it myself for my niece. And no wonder: look how it falls just below her knees. Consider the grace of the hem."

The entire circle turned to look. The skirt was, after all, exquisite. She became a model, and twirled once. The skirt flared out as intended, then fell back to her knees. She strode towards us, as if on a runway, and stopped, with her hand on one hip, about four feet away.

Every eye was on her hand as her fingers turned out the edge of the waistband, exposing a small white label, which bore the Bergdorf name. The painter stared at me, wide-eyed as the rest. She

was looking at her fiancé, he was gazing at her hand as she turned the waistband back in. I'd given him the perfect escape. I watched him to see if he'd take it.

But he'd gone so far down that path he couldn't bring himself to turn around and walk the other way. He seemed just then like a man on a forest trail who's been given a plausible reason to turn back, to not go into that coppice where a tiger might be lurking, just waiting for him to get close. Perhaps he was worried about what the other buyers would think. Or maybe he was overcome by the stubborn certainty of the slow-witted. In any case, he persisted, and signed.

"But the beauty mark on her breast," he said. "Your niece cannot possibly have the same one. You speak smartly, but you are discovered. I am determined to have my piece!"

Every eye turned in that instant to her. The women, the men. All those who were interested in beauty, and all who desired her, and even those who were simply fascinated by Art. I don't know which I was in that instant. Perhaps I was of three minds. In any case, I turned and watched with the rest. The silence was everywhere.

With a small flourish, she raised her hands from her waist, holding them open a moment for dramatic effect. Then she moved them slowly towards the button and loop of her blouse, staring directly at him. Her fingers were careful but sure with the silk, she never looked down to check. When the loop flowed over the button, the blouse opened more than halfway. I thought of cream and of strawberries, of smooth alabaster and blushing roses. Her skin was perfect: there was no beauty mark. She stood as we watched, like a statue, proudly defiant.

Her fiancé strode to the door, clutching his cane in his hand.

