

The Esméralda

Auguste was in Paris.

From his balcony, the painter admired the much-praised capital, lit by the birth of the day, smiling. He thoughtfully rubbed his neatly trimmed beard, carefully prepared for his first true public appearance. His pale gray eyes roamed the city's landscapes, reflecting his happiness and pride at being able, in just a few hours, to show and share with the public his oil paintings, which had been waiting in his studio for months already. At last, he was going to make himself known in Paris for his art, honored that very evening. He felt impatient, thrilled at the idea of opening the exhibition, like a child awaiting Christmas Eve.

He brushed back his disheveled brown hair and adjusted his suit, recalling the evening when he had received the curator's letter inviting him to exhibit his paintings in the gallery, to show his art to the world, his life. He had immediately seized the opportunity, without checking what the museum was like, and had replied to the manager with a letter overflowing with gratitude.

Thus, was about to begin his career in the arts, in the capital. He would finally be able to make himself known to the Parisian public, said to be deeply knowledgeable in the field. He thought of his parents, simple tailors who had not been able to help him much at the start of his life but had trusted him. He was proud to have succeeded, to have earned the right to enter the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and to have finally made it this far.

As time passed, it was already time for breakfast, so he went down into the street.

He observed the city, already teeming with all kinds of noises, people hurrying to grab a quick breakfast before beginning their long and difficult day amid the smoke of Parisian chimneys. The young man, in his twenties, decided to stop at a small café on the corner of the street. He ordered a black coffee while gazing with a certain passion at the dark, smoky, and noisy landscape that Paris had become in this nineteenth century. He waited, alone on the terrace, staring at the immensity of the capital where he had lived since he was three springs old.

Thus, the young painter spent his morning reading the newspaper with a distracted eye, sketching a few drawings of the people hurrying down the street, with that strange feeling born of impatience, that time was stretching to make hours feel like entire days. He was eager to see the sun set and to go to the museum, where he had dropped off his paintings yesterday afternoon, with the frustration of not yet having reached what he sought in his art, of not having finished his work, a feeling that seized him every time he completed a canvas, the feeling of not having achieved perfection.

The day went by slowly, far too slowly. He could no longer bear the wait; suddenly, he stood up, paid the bill, and rushed to the museum located in the center of the city.

He made his way through the crowd, bumping into those who stood in his path. He could not take it anymore; he had to see the curator to ask him to move the exhibition forward.

He entered the museum in a state of distress. In his eyes, one might have thought that madness had taken hold of him, but no, his mind remained clear. The painter, nearly mad, eventually found the curator. He was an old man of small stature who, dressed in his fine tailored suit, showed his delight at seeing the young painter arrive in the middle of the day, drenched in sweat. The curator felt a sense of pride in having the young man under his wing, like a father with the son he had never had.

“What brings you here, Mr. Renoir?”

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, his full name, replied while breathing heavily after his run through the streets of Paris.

“I came to see you to ask if...”

“If we could move tonight’s event forward?” guessed the curator, who had already dealt with other painters eager to be done with the pressure weighing on them.

“Yes,” gasped the young painter, who had not yet fully left behind his art school days and did not yet fully understand how the system of art sales worked.

“No, I’m sorry,” declared the curator in a tone of genuine regret, “but we cannot allow that.”

The young Renoir sighed. He would have to endure the whole afternoon yet again.

“But” continued the old curator, “I know a way to ease your impatience, my dear. You simply need to go and look at the room where we have displayed your paintings.”

The painter, out of breath, could not refuse the curator’s offer, who led him to the gallery where several artists of his age were exhibiting. There hung his canvas. Among all those Auguste had submitted, the curator had chosen to display only one, so as not to anger the other painters, who were sometimes jealous.

The Esméralda. That was the name of his painting.

It depicted a woman dancing in a luminous setting, which he had shaped with enthusiasm by playing with the light that illuminated both the woman and a cricket on the ground. Auguste leaned in and stared at the small creature at the bottom of his painting. The old curator left him alone.

The cricket. A remarkable insect that had led him to spend a whole week painting every bug in the nearby Jardin des Plantes. The young painter examined the golden wings, the abdomen, and the rest of the body with a certain pride. Though he did not draw insects to perfection, this cricket was still the best he had ever made.

It was at that moment that everything changed.

The insect on the canvas, that perfectly painted cricket that had required so much work, moved. At first with an almost imperceptible motion, shaking its delicate golden wings, then faster and faster, beating them with force until it finally lifted off from the surface of the

canvas. Auguste let out a cry of astonishment. The cricket was flying inside the painting! It took him a long moment to accept what he had just seen. Then he pulled himself together and stared at his “moving” canvas with the eye of an artist. The cricket, meanwhile, traced long circles within the painted room, exploring it eagerly. Auguste Renoir, fascinated, remained for hours watching the creation living through the canvas. Then it was Esméralda’s turn to move.

Gradually, the woman began to dance, moving from her starting pose, arms raised on one foot, to swaying her arms to an invisible rhythm that the painter could not hear. The dancer, as he called her, moved with a grace and lightness he had never witnessed before, her movements in perfect harmony with the space around her. Auguste watched her, seated on the floor of the gallery, full of admiration, observing every gesture made by the Esméralda, his eyes sparkling with joy like those of a child.

Renoir, in a state of bliss, smiling as if the gates of heaven had opened before him, failed to notice one detail: the woman was not looking at him. She did not cast a single glance his way, moving without realizing his presence, while he could see her. A wave of regret came over him. He wished he could communicate more deeply with his creation, what a fascinating conversation he could have had with that lady from the East. He lowered his head, disappointed, suddenly forgetting the impossible scene unfolding before him. He wanted more. He wanted to become one with his work.

Slowly and without realizing it, he brought his hand closer to the precious canvas where the dancer moved...

She suddenly looked at him, stopping her dancing and her smile, turning her gaze in his direction. He froze at once, unsure of what to do in front of the Esméralda. The young woman with dark skin, dressed in oriental silks, suddenly frowned, displeased that the painter was bringing his hands near her canvas.

“Uh...” hesitated the young painter, stepping back.

The young princess from the East glared at him, and Renoir instantly regretted having reached out his hand. His heart pounded in his chest. What was she going to do to him?

“I am so...” began the poor student, wanting to apologize.

“Destroy me,” said the princess sharply, staring straight into his eyes, anger widening her pupils painted on the canvas. Renoir did not understand. She repeated, with greater firmness:

“Destroy me.”

“Y... you can speak...” stammered the painter, unable to believe it.

“Yes,” replied the young dancer, sighing as if she were speaking to a deaf man, “destroy me.”

“But...” stammered the young man.

He did not understand why she was asking him this so suddenly and without any reason. Just a few minutes earlier, she had ignored him and refused to speak to him. Why, then, did she want to die? She had lived only for a few minutes, and already she was weary of his painting and of her life?

“Why?”

“Destroy me, please!” she said, shifting this time from anger to pleading. “I do not want to live like this, trapped inside this painting!”

“But I...” stammered Renoir as he stepped closer, his thoughts a blur of confusion. He had just seen his painting come to life before his eyes, and now an oriental dancer was asking him to end her brief life of only a few seconds.

The Esméralda came down to the floor of the painting to look him straight in the eyes.

“Your painting gave me life, but I cannot accept this gift. You must destroy my canvas, or I will be condemned to an eternal life, trapped within it.”

The young painter now felt his thoughts completely tangled in his mind. What was he to do? The young woman was asking—commanding—him to destroy months of creation and painting, and to ruin, on top of that, his exhibition, which was meant to launch his career, perhaps even his life.

He locked eyes with the dancer, kneeling at his level. She gazed at him with her dilated pupils, an odd light flickering in her eyes. It then seemed to Auguste that he had to grant the wish the princess-dancer had voiced. But how could he satisfy her and at the same time not destroy his own future?

An idea came to him...

The exhibition began shortly after.

With anxious steps, Auguste climbed onto the platform and stood before his painting, which for its unveiling was covered with a white cloth.

He cast a quick glance around the museum hall, where a crowd of high-society guests were chatting around a buffet dimly lit by a few candles. He then began his speech, his hands trembling slightly.

It was a brief toast, as he was not the only artist to present his work, but he had nonetheless prepared it carefully, and by the end, it earned him a few rounds of applause.

Then he lifted the cloth with what seemed like confidence, while deep inside his heart trembled at the thought of whether his plan would work. He closed his eyes.

It was a complete success. Applause filled the room, and when he opened his eyes again, it was to greet an admiring audience.

The Esméralda, as indicated on the sign on the wall, had not been put up for sale, Auguste preferred to keep the painting for himself. He looked proudly at his work, where the young

woman he had depicted remained perfectly still, sitting on the floor with her eyes closed, as if she were asleep. But he knew she was not sleeping. He quickly scanned the flawless body he had created, which had come to life a few hours earlier, with whom he had spoken at length, and with whom he had made a terrible bargain.

On the wooden floor within the painting, the cricket lay crushed beneath Esméralda's hand, only seconds earlier. Renoir watched from the gallery, a bit disappointed that he had had to remove it, for otherwise his plan would never have worked. The painter then recalled his conversation with the dancer a few hours before the exhibition...

"It's agreed then?" he had repeated to the woman in the painting.

"Yes... I stay still for the whole hour, and in exchange you burn my painting," the princess had recited knowingly.

Then she had crushed the beetle with her hand so that its flight would not reveal the painting's secret to the public, to the painter's dismay as he watched his creation destroyed despite the many hours he had spent on it. Thus, as the curator approached the room to tell Renoir that everything was about to begin, she had sat down and closed her eyelids, pretending to fall into a deep sleep. Renoir had then carefully covered her with the white cloth for the unveiling.

The exhibition was now over. In one corner, the students and professionals who had finished showing their works were chatting idly, without noticing that in one of the rooms, Renoir had slipped away with his painting.

In the dark hall of the exhibition, where no one could see him, he took a match from his pocket and prepared to strike it.

"Are you sure you want me to..."

"Yes," agreed the woman in the painting. "It must be done."

"I'll never be able to see you again," murmured the painter sadly, having grown attached to her in the span of half a day.

She did not answer, preferring not to worsen the painful separation between creator and creation. So, he placed her on the wall, in the frame where the canvas had been seen by all during those few moments of the unveiling, without anyone truly perceiving its real nature. Renoir felt a strange melancholy; one he believed he had never experienced before in his life. He hesitated for a moment, gazing at his creation, built upon all his ideals, for a few final seconds, studying once again every detail of her face: her perfectly shaped irises, her delicately pointed nose, and her cheeks blushing from the sunlight filtering through the painted window in the scene.

"Go ahead," she encouraged as he approached the painting cautiously.

Slowly, he obeyed.

He placed the flame upon the precious canvas, which caught fire instantly, then sat down on a nearby stool. And he watched Esméralda's final dance as she moved swiftly amid the flames until she vanished forever.

That night, a painter's tear fell upon the polished wooden floor.