

Prints at an exhibition: Hokusai

by mazaher

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*It is early yet
and I have fallen
in love with your bones*

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It was raining, that afternoon in December 1897, and gusts of wind swept the streets in South Kensington, but I went all the same. I am an old woman. Consumption had been eating me alive for nine months already. What did I have to lose?

It's mid-February now, isn't it, Doctor? Valentine's Day, and no sign of springtime yet. I can feel in my bones the spray of snow sprinkling from the charcoal sky, and melting into chilled rain before it can disguise the dirt and soot of this late winter.

Let me tell you what I remember.

There was an exhibition of prints by Katsushika Hokusai at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and I wanted to fill my eyes with things of beauty before being confined --as I very well knew I would be soon-- to this room in Walworth, with no other view than the red brick wall of the storehouse across the street.

You know, Doctor --I did tell you last time, didn't I? ...that my husband used to be the janitor at the Portora College in Enniskillen. When he died of a stroke at 53 (I was 44 at the time), I came to live here with my sister Flora. Between us, we've been making ends meet with our pensions. She does some knitting on request, for a small fee. She'll need the money even more when I'll be gone-- soon, now.

I apologise, Doctor, for my desultory way of telling a story. I feel the fever rising, and my memory is not what it used to be anyway... But I can see you're not in your prime either, if you don't mind me saying so. You know how it is. Some things tend to slip out of focus. Others, stay as clear as ice.

Hokusai, then. Looking at his prints, I forgot to cough.

It was not the human figures that bewitched me --the melancholy ladies in over-decorated dresses and hairstyles, the laughing old men, the plump children playing-- nor the landscapes, although the Views of Mount Fuji and the Male and Female waves are as perfect as vivid dreams.

It was the animals.

A whole world of living things, going about their business with the implacable grace of complete truthfulness.

When I stepped in front of the Dead Tiger in the Snow I had to sit down. I couldn't breathe.

It was then that I saw them.

I recognised them at once, although twelve years had passed. They had been pupils at Portora both, the dark-haired one a couple of years the senior of the fair-headed, thinner one.

I felt dizzy. I fumbled for their names...

I feel I can trust you with their names, Doctor. I have heard, and I can see myself, how you value loyalty to living flesh and blood more than faithfulness to an idea, an abstract rule, a principle without a body.

It was Moriarty, Patrick Moriarty. And Jacob Wazinski... no, Waszowski. I had never forgotten the way they used to watch one another from across the courtyard, their eyes dancing, meeting, turning away just a moment too late. Nor their covert manoeuvres to sit in view of each other at meals. To my knowledge, they had never exchanged more than a few words, until...

Until the day when the dark one, Waszowski, jumped into a fight at Moriarty's side against a bunch of five undergraduates, and probably saved his life.

I remember they came back bloody and victorious. I remember Waszowski helping Moriarty limp to his room. I remember neither said a word against their assailants, although the event had made quite a stir and they were threatened with expulsion themselves if they didn't make names.

Most of all, I remember how they began seeking each other, their fingers touching on the pages of books and the smooth sides of glasses, their bodies grazing one another while stepping through doorsteps or running down staircases.

Yet there was a fear between them: a haunted look in Moriarty's eyes, a longing in Waszowski's.

It had happened such a long time ago.

I was sitting there, across from the Tiger. They came to stand in front of me, their backs to the bench, watching her. Upright, strong. They didn't see me. They only had eyes for the Tiger, and each other. They stayed for a while.

Then I saw that Moriarty was shaken by a subtle tremor, his sight still fixed on the sardonic grin of the dead beast, her twenty unsheathed claws proud and useless against the numberless, ruthless claws of winter. Waszowski touched Moriarty's arm; he roused himself with a sight and allowed the other to lead him away..

I stood and followed them.

We wove our way in and out of the halls, along the paths of silent sounds and imagined scents unfolding in Hokusai's prints. Our courses separated, reunited, crossed.

I watched them.

Handsome they were; more than handsome, beautiful together. So much in love with each other it hurt to watch. I could see that fear didn't keep them apart anymore, no ghosts haunted them, no longing remained unfulfilled.

Curiously, this seemed to make room between them... open a space wide enough to allow a whole world in. The seasons, the people, the flowered branches with the perched grasshoppers, the animals and birds and wide landscapes, all found a place in their shared minds and hearts. Moriarty's face would lighten up at the sight of the Hawk in Flight, then he would turn to Waszowski and the light would reflect back, doubled.

In the end, they returned to the Tiger. Moriarty smiled this time, whispered something to his companion. I caught a few words: "...Vatican Museums ... Sarcophagus of the Spouses ...your smile, mine."

This time, the Tiger's grin felt like a blessing.

It could not last. As I got tired, I couldn't suppress my cough any longer. People began to stare at me. I made my way to the exit.

I stopped suddenly on the first step, lashed by shivers as the cold wind slapped me. I hadn't realised they were just behind me. They bumped into me; I staggered and almost fell to the side.

But Waszowski caught me, one hand on my shoulder, the other at my waist. He helped me right myself.

"I beg your pardon for my carelessness, madam. I hope you're not hurt...?"

His voice soft and deep. His face, worried. No hint of recognition. I tried to get my breath back without coughing.

"I am quite fine, sir, thank you. No damage done."

"If you're sure..."

"Yes, yes, sure, thank you. No need to concern yourself."

He turned to go. Moriarty lingered one step behind, picked the white carnation off his buttonhole and offered it to me with a silent bow. I took it with shaking hands. He smiled, nodded, turned to follow his companion, cold fingers slipping into gloves.

You know as well as I do, Doctor, that when death is at hand, nothing is sweeter than knowing love is still possible. That in the face of danger, loss, and grief, human beings still find each other, and fall in love. Than when I can't love any longer, there is someone who will.

I lost my love eight years ago. I'm grieving my own inevitable death. But I have that afternoon to hold on to as I go: the smile of the dead tiger, painted by an old man who was in love with drawing, and the smile of a love which is forever young. I find it's almost enough.

Look, Doctor, this is the flower. I've kept it here, in this book of recipes my grandmother left to my mother and my mother to me. After all, love is a lot like cooking. You make the best you can with what you have. I am so happy that in the end, for them there has been plenty.

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Note: A print of the *Old Tiger in the Snow* was part of the exhibition *Hokusai: il vecchio pazzo per la pittura*, held at Palazzo Reale in Milan in 1999. Hokusai painted her barely three months before his own death at 90 years of age. I visited the exhibition on the 11th of December, while suffering from severe bronchitis. What I saw then, has now morphed into this story.