

Arthur Japin

Mrs. Degas

Arbeiderspers, 2020

Sample translation: Jonathan Reeder

*There is an empty, white sheet and it has to be filled.*

*That first line... The urge to find it. The courage to draw it. Your hand flutters above the paper, nervous. Fingers like dragonflies, afraid to land. Searching. Touching. Jerking up again, startled. That moment of hesitation where everything is still an idea. Until the first stroke, all options are still open. Blessed desperation. Almighty ignorance.*

*Finally the charcoal lands and a black furrow makes its way across the pristine surface.*

*Envisioning has become rendering, irreversible. A first line, and from there, a second. Once the canvas is marked, the assault on the empty space has begun, and you have to carry on with what you have.*

*Regret, smudge out. Scratches in beauty, scrapes across the ideal. Creating is constraining. Something comes to life because you rob it of its endlessness. The way we ourselves evolve. Thanks to constraints. Creation is crossing out possibilities. Eliminating opportunities. Relinquishing freedom and curtailing dreams. Pinning down thoughts. Barricading escape routes. You thought you could do everything, but you accomplish only this one thing. Filling a sheet.*

*I once brushed one of my model's hair for four hours, just to get the feel of the structure, get inside her, become a woman, to fathom the motions of combing, before I dared sketch even the first lock of hair.*

*'Never draw from life,' Ingres warned. 'Only from memory.'*

*An artist has seen limitless potential. And out of it, he manages to produce no more than this one thing. That is why he can never be satisfied.*

*And yet, when the representation is finally there, he is praised all round for being able to create something out of nothing. But what you create does not come out of nothing, it comes out of everything.*

37, rue Victor-Massé

Paris, 1912

*First report*

The man so old, the place, the ghastliness of it all, I stood there shaky-kneed. And, my God, it's exactly as you said: that head of his, completely haggard! His hair and beard haven't been trimmed in two, three years for sure, and we can only hope there's been a bath now and then. That someone chooses to live like this. Or no, choice has little to do with it, of course, it's more that a man on his own cannot always cope.

For a moment I thought my voice would crack, but he didn't notice. He just assumed I had been sent by old Zoë to fill in for that poor creature who, for now, cooks his meals and has to tidy up that hovel, and who he hates with a passion.

My first impulse was to just leave him in the dark. It would have been a good cover. Perhaps even better. As household help I would be free to come and go, and steer the whole operation. I would have access to all the rooms without it raising any

suspicious, and if he were to catch me one day going through a drawer where I have no business being, a thorough cleaning is as good excuse as any.

Had I been bolder, I might have dared deviate from our plan, tie on an apron, and announce myself as the new maid. It wouldn't have made any difference to our ruse. What held me back was knowing that mealtimes would be my undoing, because as Estelle – God have her soul – reproached me often enough: if there was one thing I was not cut out for, it was cooking.

So I stuck to the plan we had agreed upon and told him I had been hired to fill the vacancy.

'What vacancy?' he growled. 'Be off with you, Miss, and try your luck somewhere as a midinette, I don't know anything about a vacancy.'

I held my ground and said, as you advised, that I had been hired by Paul Durand-Ruel and I'd already been paid to help inventory his archive and assist with the move. (You're sure Paul and his sons will back us up if my story ever gets checked?)

'Damned meddling!' he grouched. 'Of all the nuisances of old age, charity is the most intolerable. I'd advise everyone to die prematurely, because an old person gets smothered with unasked-for help.'

I had come under the guise of business. So businesslike is how I behaved. I took out a notebook and, with the tone of a civil servant, went through a number of questions.

'On what date must this house be vacated?'

'If it's up to the workmen? End of the month.' His fingers stroked the wainscotting, absentmindedly, as one pets a dog begging for attention. 'Maybe it can be put off for a week or so. Anyway, they want to have the whole thing razed by summer so they can start building that new thing this year. Businessmen. No heart. Everyone's doing too well. The ground is worth too much, they can't wait to cash in on it.'

'How many stories does it have?'

'Three.'

'And is it as full everywhere as here?'

'Fuller. I thought I'd leave some space in this room to receive uninvited guests.'

Satisfied with his sneer, he looked straight at me for the first time.

It's like looking into a skull! You had warned me, but still my heart constricted. How is it possible, I thought – is this all that's left of a gaze that gave the world so much color?

I don't know how far gone he was when you last saw him, but now his musculature has atrophied, too. The fat behind his eyeballs has dissolved, so that they sink into their sockets. The sunkenness is only exaggerated by the surrounding skin, which is unhealthily dark, bluish like livor mortis. His eyelids hang like a half-raised curtain before an empty stage. Behind them, far beyond the lashes, the pupils are like pinpricks in a void.

Are these the eyes that once scrutinized me? They must have done so with patience back then. Or *impatience*, rather, because I'm sure I did not lie still while he was busy with his sketchbook. (I know from your children that they drove him mad, playing and crawling around while he tried to draw them. Sadly, this is almost the only thing they remember of the poor fellow: his constant vexation that they refused to sit still, like his Paris models did.)

Are you sure he still can distinguish contours and shadows? Him glancing in my direction felt more like a coincidence than anything else, for when I, startled and unnerved, shifted positions, his gaze did not follow me, but rather stared straight over my shoulder, resting on an infinite void.

'Downstairs, on the first floor,' began his summing-up, 'is where I keep my art collection. Then there is this floor, where I live with all the rubbish that goes with it, and upstairs is my studio, and there... well, oh, what all's up *there*... One accumulates so much over the years, of course, the payoff of a life's work.'

'And all that is in storage?'

'In *storage*?' He banged his fist on the table. 'Does it look like I've already died? My works are not "in storage", young lady, they are waiting for me to attend to them.'

'Do you still work, then?'

'I'm still breathing.'

'But I thought...'

'I don't know what you've been told, but all my unfinished work is going with me – the sculptures, every canvas I still consider not quite done, everything. No matter how keen Paul is to make money off me, none of it is going to his gallery.'

'Noted. All unfinished work goes with you. Indeed, why not? If there's enough room for it in your new quarters...'

'We'll know that once a suitable address has been found.'

'Do you mean to say they haven't offered you a new house yet?'

'Plenty. They nag me day in day out, but I won't be bullied. I refuse to leave the Ninth. This is my arrondissement. I was born here and I will die here. I won't set foot anywhere past Pigalle. Otherwise I'd rather face the wrecking ball myself.'

'I had always understood that you were so enterprising. Are. Inquisitive. Adventurous enough to have traveled half the globe...'

'You "understood" that, did you, and from whom, may I ask, or did they put that in that damned advertisement, too?' He stretched upright, like a doe who smells a hunter. 'Listen here, young lady, I don't know what your business here is. Joseph and Georges Durand-Ruel, Paul's boys, are to take inventory of my collection. Or do you know as much about art as about how I've conducted my life?'

'Not at all, I...'

'And something else: if so much as one word of this is made public, then I will litigate you down to your last sou.'

'What is there to be made public? No one will hear a word from me.'

'I hear that scribble-scrabble of yours. You're taking notes! Newspaper advert, *mon cul!* You're not here through the newspaper, you're here *from* the paper, sent by your editors for a scoop on crazy old Degas. Let's nose around in his misery, shall we? Screw him one more time, in his washed-up glory! Let's see if we can tempt the old fool to blurt out something shocking, take a swipe at humanity, stir things up, let's brand him an anti-Semite again. Still good for a two-page spread, yes?'

I thought he would rant like this forever and saw our whole mission come to naught, but finally – don't ask how – I managed to calm him down and persuade him of my innocence and good intentions.

'There is so much I can help you with,' I said. 'Administration, letters, books, old papers. Someone has to go through them before they get crated and moved. Sift essential correspondence from what can go. What you are attached to and what can be burned. A person amasses so many words in a lifetime. Someone will need to be your eyes.'

He pondered it and nodded.

'I appreciate all too well that it's unsettling,' I continued. 'What do you know of me, after all? Why should you turn something so personal over to me? A house is so more than just "things" when you've lived in it for as long as you have.'

I stood up and made as if to leave.

'Give it some thought. I'm offering my assistance, no more than that. You're looking at quite a job, so it shouldn't be put off for too long. With your permission, I'll come back tomorrow. And then, if you want, we can start right away. I'd suggest a sober, systematic approach. Room by room, cupboard by cupboard. Only with your input and approval. I'll describe each item and you can decide if I'm to open it and read it. Nothing will be disposed of without your consent. But if it's too much for you, then I'll understand. *Sans rancune*. You can send me away tomorrow and we'll leave it all be.'

My not pressing him gave me credibility.

'Those things'll have to get moved out eventually, I suppose' he said.

'Moving them out is not the issue. I can just load it all into crates and set it downstairs. Easy.'

'And then?'

'Off to the wasteyard with it.'

'Unseen?'

'Unseen. Or you can drag it all with you, of course, but why? It's not as though the moment will come when you can sit down and read through it all.'

He saw the logic in that.

'How worthless a person becomes,' he sighed, shaking his head. 'So redundant. Just like the junk you've accumulated in your head. I was so impressed with it all when it came into the house, but now it's going end up at the dump. The same happens to you as a man. Before you know it, you've lost all relevance.'

'Maybe we'll reclaim some of that relevance,' I said quietly. 'Somewhere in the chaos.'

Every house that faces the wrecking ball resigns itself to its fate. But here, it's as though it gave up years ago. The threadbare Persian rugs, the faded walnut trim, the peeling paint, the soiled upholstery, runs in the wall fabric, moisture stains everywhere, here and there the battens showing through. Granted, surroundings lose their import when a person cannot see them. Another person might have friends who would have stepped in, but the fickle old fool has alienated everyone.

No wonder his old housekeeper left: wherever you look, those stacks of former times! In every corner, the driftwood of one's life, mounded up like mud in the wake of a flood. Everywhere one turns, the past is caked on, as though it percolates up on sleepless nights along with the seepage.

Worst of all is the room where he holes himself up for entire days, just imagine, your toilet and bath in full view! The burgundy rug surrounding it is blackened with stains. Over the years a path from the bidet to his iron bed has been scrubbed bare, but this in no way suggests anything like hygiene. Greasy fingerprints on the bell-rope, a layer of dust on the houseplants.

This would be less of an eyesore against the backdrop of an otherwise shabby interior, but the contrast is even more bitter in the midst of such opulence. The gloss of fine antiques, silver candelabra and lamp crystal amongst all those toppled stacks, sagging draperies, the open drawers overflowing with his existence...

In a way, the tableau reflects the man. Behind the wild white locks and under the decrepitude of his visage there still flickers a trace of elegance, a glint of the panache with which he stood sketching in the wings at the Opéra, something of the attention with which he studied the ballerinas during their morning class, a remnant of the sensitivity to their injuries, an eye for their overtight costumes and piercing whalebone corsets, for how the pink ribbons of their *pointes* cut into their ankles.

The man he once was shows like a *pentimento* through his own layer of grime. His back, hunched with the humiliation of its ruin, occasionally rights itself for a moment with the pride with which he once walked along the paddocks at Longchamps or the halls of the family palazzo in Naples.

Remnants which give me hope that we might be able to rouse in him something of our mutual past.

‘Reclaim something of relevance...’ he repeated in a murmur. ‘It’s true – think how much must have piled up in all those cupboards and commodes! Every little stack betrays habits, idiosyncrasies, worn-out sentiments, unexpected souvenirs, forgotten friends.’

‘Not to mention loves...’

‘Which I will not!’ he said curtly.

Curse my indiscretion! I almost had him, and now he was on his guard again.

‘Come back tomorrow.’ He got up, signaling the end of our discussion. ‘I’ll let you know then what I’ve decided.’

When we talked this plan through with Paul Valéry, he gave it scant chance at success, but at least some hope. If only he’d given me some concrete instructions, I think now that I’m in The Bear’s den: a layout of the house, a plan of attack. I’ve simply been sent; I am the one taking the risks and if everything comes out I’ll be the one who pays for it. I don’t know how to deal with someone who for years has had to fight off all manner of vultures, students hoping for a lesson, journalists digging for gossip, admirers hoping for an autograph, profiteers sniffing out the chance to pocket some of his fame or his property. No wonder he is so tightfisted with his trust.

What now? I would most like to just lay my cards on the table. After all, sooner or later I’ll have to divulge who I am, why I’ve come, and own up to the trick that’s been played on him. Supposing he discovers the truth before we achieve anything ... it would only embitter him further. Feed his mistrust. And I have to say, one could hardly blame him.

As he accompanied me to the vestibule, I wondered at my audacity of an hour ago to have even rung the bell. To be certain I actually left the premises, the old man stood waiting as I buttoned my coat.

‘You have an accent,’ he said suddenly. ‘What is it, Maghreb?’

I did not answer. I wish I’d said ‘yes’, for every lie likes to be covered by the next one.

‘It sounds familiar,’ he insisted.

‘I’ve been back for a few years already,’ I said evasively. ‘I had no idea one could still hear it.’

‘Are you from one of our colonies?’

‘No,’ I laughed. ‘No, not a colony. It hasn’t been a colony in quite some time.’

The truth is as good as bait.

‘Louisiana?’ he hazarded.

‘Louisiana,’ I affirmed, pulling the door quickly behind me. ‘Till tomorrow!’

### *Second report*

Whether I knew any of his family.

It was the first thing he asked this morning. I was barely upstairs, I still had my coat on. So this is how vivid it still is. He followed me to the kitchen when I went to make tea, asked if I still had contact with folks there. Whether we might have some mutual friends among the Louisianais.

‘De Gas-Musson,’ he clarified, with the impatience of one who had spent all night waiting for the answer. ‘New Orleans cotton traders.’

So it’s not, as you wrote, that he wants to just write off the whole episode. On the contrary. I can, prudently and patiently, go in search of a tangible memory from those days – if there’s anything left after half a century, that is – and see what that elicits. Keep your fingers crossed, I am doing my best and realize full well that not only your peace of mind depends on this undertaking, but probably his as well.

Perhaps he's just testing me, I thought, all of a sudden. If I go ahead and confirm that I knew the De Gas-Mussons, then he'll barricade himself behind the same wall you ran up against. But playing dumb and denying, flat out, any recollection—I don't dare do that, either.

'Degas-Musson...' I repeated, to play for time.

'*De Gas,*' he corrected, irritated, as though the original spelling was a whim. 'Two words, spelled the hoity-toity way. Trading office on Carondelet Street, number 63, not far from the cotton exchange. Around the corner from Canal Street, just outside the French Quarter. Come on, think—it was one of the city's busiest offices. Until the early seventies, at least.'

'The early seventies!' I sighed. 'I'd only just been born.'

'The family lived on Esplanade Avenue. Still does, as far as I know.'

'As far as you know?' I asked innocently. 'Have you no contact with them?'

'Don't care to.'

'You have the address. I could write a letter for you.'

'To what end?'

'I don't know. Family. Sometimes that's a good thing in life.'

'Big white house on Esplanade. On the corner of, come, what's it called...? Northernmost bit of the Vieux Carré.'

'We spent most of our time on the plantation,' I lied. 'Upriver, towards Baton Rouge. But whenever we sailed down the river and you could see the church in the distance... I remember the smell of the orchards as we approached the city.'

'Citrus!' He nodded. 'And magnolia!'

'And those endless fields of sugar beets. Oh, the way they appeared in the distance as you sailed in, the white plaster of the façades shimmering in the hot, humid air.'

This tactic seemed to work. I spoke softly, a bit dreamily, to coax the old man into joining my musings. Every so often I went quiet, so as to give him time to let his thoughts drift back in time.

'As you sail in...' He repeated it as though replaying the scene in his mind's eye. 'The land is so much lower than the dike that you look down from the water onto the houses.'

'And when the boat rounds that last wide bend...'

'At Boulogne.'

'... the twin white spires of the Saint-Louis above the smoke of the ships on the quay.'

'Ah, that river,' he sighed, 'that enormous, mighty river!' He gestured for me to come sit next to him.

'Next to the cathedral you had the wide, low hall of the Cabildo,' I led him on. 'The forts, the army bakery, the shops on Almonaster, shoppers strolling down Rue Toulouse. And along the whole breadth of the waterfront, such industriousness! The captains on the levee, the Colored porters, the red brick of the warehouses, the sloops and the ropes, all the activity around the sugar auction.'

'Ham and molasses vendors,' he added, as though they were still blocking his way. 'You could hardly get through, with all those ox-heads stacked up on the sidewalk.'

'Wooden piers piled with bales of cotton,' I said, 'and that dry-sour smell they gave off, something you won't smell anywhere else. New Orleans... The shriek of the steamboat whistles – I can just hear them now.'

'And through it all, the constant shouts of the newspaper boys: *'Picayune, come get your Daily Picayune!'*

'The oily scent of beignets!'

'Oily and sweet.' He shook his head fondly. 'Beignets with warm milk.'

'So you've been there,' I said, feigning surprise. 'Long ago?'

He fell silent, not to count the years, but out of mistrust.

I have to learn to let *him* do the talking, even when he meanders away from where I want him, and not keep impatiently interrupting him. You really should have sent someone better trained at this. I can't imagine how a secret agent does it, day after day, without being caught out.

‘But I’m wasting your time,’ I said, once again businesslike. I gulped down my tea and got up. ‘They aren’t paying me for chit-chat. I’m here to work. Shall we start downstairs?’

How effortlessly he finds his way around! Nowhere does he slow down, never a cautious step. On the contrary: he does not even hold the banister while using the stairs, he just propels himself forward in impatient spurts, and takes the stairs rashly, like a young man. It is not that his blindness does not hinder him, but more that he refuses to let it hold him back. There is drive in his movements. Determination.

Was he always so impatient, even back when he drew us? How he attacked the paper with wild strength and intuitiveness, at once passionate and cautious. He probably was: hard on reality, soft on the graphite in his fingers. Angular strokes of the pencil, I imagine, short and angry, and then, as in a dance, suddenly composed and measured, hovering above his drawing, searching. The precision with which he captured us. It is that same nervous elan that leads him through his invisible world, the piercing look behind the clenched eyelids.

He led the way downstairs and through the hallway; without hesitating he pulled the right key from the rack and opened his treasure trove.

His ‘museum’!

It is more a depot than a showcase, pitch dark at first and so chock-full that I could hardly make my way to the window. He requires no light himself, so who knows when the sun last shone inside? When I pulled open the curtain and opened the shutters, the room lit up, aglow in a flurry of dust.

You mentioned how wondrous it is that someone has such a collection in their house, but nothing could have prepared me for a trove like this.

The walls are covered with art, floor to ceiling, frame against frame, some even overlapping. Against the wall, rows upon rows of canvasses are stacked upright, at times meters deep. Throughout the room are print cabinets, portfolios, fully-laden easels.

'I've been fortunate,' he said modestly. 'A lot of it is the work of people I knew. I got most of it for a bargain. Sometimes we would trade works or pay one another with something like a meal or bottle of wine.'

That did not apply, in any case, to the El Grecos and the Tiepolo, or for the Hokusai and Hiroshige prints, of which I counted roughly a hundred. And then the many Ingres, not to mention works by his own contemporaries... these fellows are better represented in that one room on the rue Victor-Massé than in all the museums in France put together: Gaugin, eight works; Manet, Corot, and Cézanne, seven each; Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley and Rousseau; sunflowers and a still life by Van Gogh, some two hundred drawings by Delacroix and thirteen of his paintings; bronze statues by Barye and Bartholomé; and as for Daumier's lithographs – these are assembled in four huge stacks, certainly two thousand of them in all!

'Good Lord,' I exclaimed, 'what to do with all this!'

'Now that I'm dead, do you mean?'

'I mean when you have to move. Or is this all going with you, too?'

'It's crossed my mind to donate everything to my country. Doesn't that sound magnificent? The whole caboodle in one go. They'll have to name at least one big room in the museum after me, and with a little luck an entire wing. Then I'll go sit there and revel in my generosity. On one of those benches. Visitors can congratulate me for my noble gesture.'

'More people will be able to enjoy these works than do now.'

'My last gift to the nation hangs shriveling in full sunlight, thank you very much. Go look for yourself: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, one canvas is wrinkling because they did a duff job stretching it, with a work on paper they used the wrong glue to stiffen it so now air bubbles have formed under the paint.'

'Keep it all together then, the collection as a whole, and set your own conditions. Wouldn't that be fine, a house museum, where everything stays as it was?'

'Like Moreau's place, do you mean? That's no house, it's a mausoleum. Grim and soulless. You expect to find a desiccated body behind every door. And besides, God knows where I'll end up. After the move. If I don't watch out they'll shunt me off to some flophouse on the edge of town.'

That thought upset him so much that his calmness evaporated.

'What have you come here to do, Miss?' he asked bitterly, 'help me with my papers or divvy up my estate? I never let anyone in here, never, and now I remember why.'

*translation © Jonathan Reeder 2020*