

Mise en Abyme

July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1890. Auvers-sur-Oise, France.

Two little boys play in a wheat field. They are pretending to be thieves and one of them has a revolver. The revolver belongs to his drunkard father who had forgotten to lock it up the night before. Inside its metal innards, the shiny spinning cylinder, rest three cartridges. Under the midday sun the gun is warm and sticky in the boy's hand, like spilled wine on a tabletop. This doesn't bother him. He is an excellent thief.

A few feet away from them a redheaded man in a sunhat is taking a pull from his cigarette. He has been admiring the way the wheat tosses like an ocean in the wind; trying to understand how the gold makes the sky seem impossibly bluer. When he hears the two boys sneaking up behind him, he turns and smiles. He recognizes them. He points at the gun leveled at his chest.

"You should be careful with that," he says.

"Nobody tells a thief what to do," the little boy responds, and pulls the trigger.

A spark.

In the heat, in the middle of summer, in the middle of a wheat field, the man tips slowly backwards. The black smoke from the discharged gun blooms towards the sun and then dissipates. The man's cigarette drops from his hand and hits the dirt, where it flickers once and fades to a dull glow. The brim of his hat angles skyward and then falls dead on its back. The little boy drops his gun. The other one begins to scream.

The man is Vincent van Gogh, and he's just been shot in the chest.

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Vincent awakes to music. It is sharp and sporadic, often punctuated by sudden bursts of volume, and yet somehow it is pleasant. He listens for a moment and then stirs, eyelids sticky, mouth foul. He pushes his tongue against his teeth, already loose under his lips from years of smoking and malnutrition, and then spits off the side of his bed. He is living in the attic of *Auberge Ravoux*, an inn in Auvers-sur-Oise. He has come here to be closer to Dr. Paul Gachet, a man who allegedly will be able to treat his declining mental health; who will be able to dispel the madness that cannot be named or understood but nevertheless scrapes out the tender parts of Vincent like meat from an oyster shell. Dr. Gachet has worked with many artists before, but none so troublesome as Vincent, who has spent the last two years in and out of asylums and is just now achieving some degree of stability. Vincent secretly believes that Dr. Gachet is no sounder of mind than he is, but he will never tell him so.

The doctor will want him to eat something this morning, but for now Vincent is distracted by the music, which seems to be growing louder. He gets out of bed and makes for the cupboard where he keeps his clothes, wasting no time shaving or combing his hair. He finds his eyes in the hand mirror sitting on the desk and tries hard not to pick apart the gaunt face that stares back at him. He puts on his favorite yellow sunhat and turns away.

The room he passes through is plain, decorated only by a bed and a dressing desk. On the desk is a letter to his brother, Theo, half-written, thanking him for the 50-

franc note he had last sent him. Otherwise the room is bare; his paintings are stored in a shed behind the inn, and there are no windows.

Vincent descends down the stairs as if called by a siren. He looks in the sitting room of the inn, searching for the source of the noise, but finds nothing. Adeline, the eldest daughter of the inn's owners, sees him making his way to the door and greets him. She asks him if he will please stop and take breakfast with her. He returns the greeting, but refuses the meal. The music is loud and elsewhere, and it draws him away.

As he leaves the room he notes that she does not stare at his mangled ear anymore, as they all did when he first arrived. Once, as he painted her, she had inquired of him the cause of the injury. Troubled, he reflected on the event, but found he could not remember the actual separation of flesh from body. Instead, he remembered in vivid detail the instrument of the crime itself: a shaving razor, freshly stropped, shining like a miracle in his hand. He had gestured outward with it, slashing towards his friend Paul Ganguin, and the blade had shocked his eyes like a flash of heavenly light. Like the stories of men who spoke of seeing angels.

He remembers no more after that. He does not wish to remember more.

Leaving the inn, he steps out into the mid-morning sunshine. It is a mild day though it is growing hotter as the sun rises. Two men are sitting at one of the tables outside of *Auberge Ravoux*, smoking and drinking strong black coffee. One of them spies Vincent and waves his cigarette at him, imploring him to come sit with them- to come talk about his next painting. Vincent does not acknowledge them. The music is loud now. He walks into the street and looks out from under his hat, squinting into the light.

He falters, and though it pains him, he begins to laugh.

Not music at all, but children. Two young boys playing and laughing by the inn. They have clambered onto the rooftop of one of the surrounding stone houses and are balancing on its thatched roof, making a show of taking swings at each other. As Vincent watches, an old woman comes outside to yell and beat at them with her broom. The children shout delightedly and slide down the roof, hitting the ground on all fours and sprinting away. Their laughter, now distinct, now painfully clear, begins to jump and fade as they run down the road. They are going towards the wheat field.

Vincent pulls his hat off and looks toward the sun, wishing it would blind him for a moment. He tries to choke down the shame and self-loathing that rises like bile in his throat. What a cruel joke his mind had played to make him think he had heard music. That he, Vincent, loved by no woman, might hear children playing and think a song was being sung for him. How laughable. How foolish.

In one strong motion he pulls his hat back on and starts down the road. He craves movement. The men at the table call after him one last time, but he doesn't hear them. He knows he will have to tell Dr. Gachet about this incident, and he fears the man won't be pleased. He hopes this doesn't mean that he's going to have one of his episodes again. He rarely remembers them, but he doesn't like the forgetting.

There's a cigarette in his coat pocket. He finds it and lights it.

The boys are going towards the wheat field, where Vincent has been painting recently. He likes the way the crows gather there in the afternoon- likes the ways they chase each other. Crows mate for life. His brother told him that once.

So he'll go to the wheat field today, he decides, flicking the ash off his cigarette. He will try and put this whole thing behind him. Maybe the day will improve. In any case, he thinks the walk will do him good.

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Two ten-year-old boys are playing in a wheat field. One of them has his father's revolver, which he believes to be empty. The little boy's mind is bright and hot, and he is dreaming of being cunning enough to take beloved things away. He and his friend crash through the golden stalks and discover their unsuspecting target, a man in a sunhat standing with his back turned.

Over the field, the sun begins to tip its cap towards the gathering clouds. The air is warm and soft and yellow.

A beautiful day after all, the man thinks, taking a puff on his cigarette,

How I'd love to paint it.