

Craquelure

Esther sat in the back of the church. Down the wall ran a visible crack: it looked like Jesus was throwing a bolt of lightning.

The pastor, Father Roumain, made his final blessings and then, after lighting votive candles with a few parishioners, disappeared into his office. Esther followed, heart racing. It seemed wrong to impose on the pastor like this, but she could see no other way. Something needed to be done. It had been six months since the earthquake. Six long months of suffering...

"Father?" Esther rapped on the half-open door. "I'm sorry to intrude...?"

Father Roumain looked up. Meaty face ringed with white hair, he was crumbling crackers into a giant bowl of soup.

"Come in," he said. "You wish to get married?"

"Oh, no. I didn't come here for that..."

"Mm." Father Roumain slurped experimentally at his spoon. "Mm. Ah. It's just that a young lady like yourself...?"

"I have a question for you, Father. A favor, I mean?"

Father Roumain sliced off a hunk of bread. Jaw working, white brows knit, he stared across his desk.

"Speak, then."

"As you know, Cardinal Cordes is coming next week..."

"Yes, yes, a blessing."

"I would like to speak with His Eminence, if possible. Do you think I could get an interview with him?"

"Ah, he's very busy. I don't know his schedule. But, why?"

"I want to plead our cause."

"Cause?"

"Father, Haiti is dying," Esther said. Tears came to her eyes. "Nothing is getting better. Every day I work in the camps, but nothing..."

"Yes, yes." Father Roumain bit off more bread. "But why with...?"

"I want to speak to him about our Holy Father, the Pope," Esther said. "To ask him to convince His Holiness about coming in person to Haiti."

Father Roumain ceased chewing. His brow rose.

"His Holiness himself."

"Yes," Esther said.

Father Roumain took up his spoon. "It's not possible, I'm sure."

"Father, I was reading that Pope Paul VI gave up his tiara, laying it on the steps of the basilica in Rome. His jeweled crown, Father! They sold it and the money went to charities. Imagine if Benedict came here and did something like that?"

"By selling his hat at the market?"

"Not necessarily, I only mean if..."

Father Roumain held up his hand. "Please, sister, I've had a long day. Haven't we all? This has been hard for everyone. We are still recovering, both in body and in spirit..."

"Yes, but--"

"Listen, why don't you come to confession this Wednesday and meet with Father Alphonse? He can help you, perhaps, with writing a letter and--"

"I've already written a letter. Dozens!"

"Well, if His Excellency Miot were still with us..." Father Roumain sighed and wiped at his mouth. He belched quietly. "Such a shock."

"Yes, it was. Yes..." Esther bowed her head.

"Anything else, child?"

"You won't help me, then?"

"I will do all I can."

"What does that mean?"

Father Roumain took out his handkerchief and honked his nose. "Please, go home to your farm. Your father needs you there, I'm sure. Everyone is suffering now. Yes? It is God's plan."

"No, it can't be! It *can't* be God's plan!"

He waved his spoon. "Go. And no more silliness about hats!"

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The dark streets were filled with rubble; they took on monstrous forms--beaked, humped, demonic. Stars shone dim and distant in the close, humid air. A cat scampered into a jagged shell of a building...

Esther allowed herself an extra minute to smoke a cigarette. Her chest heaved, her hands shook. At last, wiping her face and throwing the butt in a grate, she climbed the stairs that was partially missing its railing. She entered the apartment where Uncle Marten was sitting at the table and slurping over a bowl. Of course, she thought. A country of old men eating soup.

"Have some dinner," said Uncle Marten.

"Not hungry."

Esther flopped down on the couch. Her uncle, wearing a button-down white shirt and jeans, grunted over the newspaper. His dog, Toussaint, was curled asleep under the easel.

All around were paintings. Some stacked, others hanging. Many depicted nude women. When Esther used to visit as a young girl, Uncle Marten would turn most of the canvases around. Now that she was an adult, he said, she could handle Art. Bare-breasted women riding dolphins in the ocean. A woman with abundant pubic hair eating a mango. A naked girl sleeping on a rumpled bed in the moonlight...

"So how did it go?"

Esther shrugged. Her eyes drifted to the painting of Eve holding out a shiny apple to Adam, who stroked his beard. The painting was actually quite old--Uncle Marten had never been able to sell it due to the genitals being hyper-detailed. Because of its age, and from the type of cheap paint used, Eden was now covered in a web of hairline cracks. Uncle Marten professed to like the cracks, which Esther thought very strange. She thought the painting should be thrown away or given to charity.

"I could have told you that."

"He won't do a thing. Nothing!"

"Of course," said Uncle Marten. "What do you expect the church to do? They wish to keep everyone down and ignorant. It ensures customers for generations."

Esther ignored the gibe. "He told me to talk with Father Alphonse, but I don't know if I'll get any further with him. Oh, if I could just have a few minutes with His Eminence!"

Uncle Marten picked at his teeth, grimaced. "Just like your mother. She was always trying to fix things. She never understood that nothing can be fixed. Nothing can be changed."

The whole apartment smelled of turpentine; blue and brown and pink paint dotted the warped floor. The lone window looked out on a brick wall. A baby screamed from next door. Esther wondered how much longer she could bear to live there.

Uncle Marten set another bowl on the table. "You have to eat," he said. "Come on. Put food in your belly."

Sighing, Esther got off the couch. As she ate, she started to feel better, a tiny more hopeful. Maybe talking with Father Alphonse would accomplish something after all.

Uncle Marten watched her. "I could use an assistant, you know. You were so talented..."

He still had some of her work. His favorite, painted when she was fifteen, was of a parade of skeletons dressed in military uniforms. It hung in a wooden frame over the couch.

"I can't sit around and paint when people are starving and women are being raped in the camps. I'm sorry, Uncle."

"You can paint a good painting that people enjoy."

"No, I can't. I've already told you I *can't*."

Uncle Marten sighed, grumbled, nodded. While Esther washed dishes, he sat himself before the easel. His latest canvas had cerulean waves, a frosted moon, a boat with dark alizarin figures standing at the bow...

He started to paint.

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Carrying a basket, Esther hopped over a fissure; and then another; some were wide enough to swallow a car. She was on Dessaline Boulevard, one of Port-au-Prince's busiest, and it was still a shameful mess. Tattered sheets hung from a leaning utility pole. The twisting black

fingers of a fire escape led nowhere. Graffiti in red spray paint covered a freestanding wall; it said: *LAP NANTET LAPE NAN VANT!!!*

The market was ahead. Children ran about. How many of them fell into the cracks?

Oh-h-h--!

The ground shook--

No: a passing bus. Esther blew out a breath.

Any moment she feared another quake, the last big one that would rip everything apart and plunge her like Archbishop Miot into an endless abyss...

A procession of men passed, singing songs and beating on drums; one man had a beautiful voice, a rich high tone. They had been doing this since the disaster. It was nice, but what they really needed was cement mixers not sopranos.

On her list were lentils, beans, onions, and goat meat if it wasn't too expensive. Uncle Marten expected her to be tough. *Get the best price*, he'd said repeatedly, wagging his paint brush. People also looking for the best price crowded the stands. *Raga* played on a boom box. Bright umbrellas lined the square, shuddering as shoppers bumped into them. A man straddling a tap-tap yelled through a megaphone and shook an American flag.

"Momma, I want to go dere!"

A child wearing only diapers pointed his chubby fist. Esther looked around. Where was the mother? Several women pawed at piles of melons and mangoes.

"Mommy, I want to go dere! I want to go dere!"

The child was nearly in tears. Esther well knew the feeling--when one's words had no effect, when there was scarcely a connection between words and reality.

Esther lifted the child to the table. "Oof! There you go!"

The boy gazed at Esther with huge eyes. His face was dirty; even his eyelashes looked dusty. Then he smiled and pointed again--this time to another table.

"I want to go dere...!"

Esther turned her back and pushed through the crowd. She had to finish shopping. And cook, clean, do laundry. Only then, at the end of the long day, would she have time to draft yet another letter to Cardinal Cordes, hoping Father Alphonse would deliver it... Someone jostled

her. People were sweating, cursing. *Get the best price.* She held her ground as she picked up an onion and squeezed it. The food was better in Leguele, her home village, but the city was the choice she had made. Her father had opposed her, but Mama at least understood. She would have gone too had she not had little ones to tend.

Months ago the sky had been filled with airdrop supplies, floating down like angels. Weren't things supposed to steadily improve? Wasn't that the meaning of civilization, wiping out disease, hunger, making life better, safer, happier? Haiti had been bad before the earthquake, as Uncle Marten never tired of pointing out, but now it was so much worse. And going backwards rapidly. Father Roumain had counseled patience, but for how long? What was the proper time for getting things fixed? Another month? A year? Ten years? No, she refused to accept it would take so long. If there was such a disaster in the United States of America or in Europe, the country would be fine again in a few days or weeks at the most. Her heart broke as she concluded that there was something wrong with her native land. But what was wrong? Some said it was the government, corrupt for decades. Uncle Marten said it was the church. What they needed was an event that would make Father Roumain, Uncle Marten and everyone in between believe again. A visit from someone powerful, someone influential. And then, once given a helping hand from the abyss, Haiti would start to heal, even prosper...

Esther was so lost in thought that she didn't hear the shouts. A government car was parting the crowd, the sun flashing off its black surface. The window rolled down. A woman wearing sunglasses looked out. She smiled; there was a gap in her front teeth.

"Hey! Hey! Esther!"

Confused, Esther went over. It was someone she knew, but she couldn't place the person right away. The young woman laughed.

"It's D'Arcy! From school, yeah?"

Esther nodded. Oh! That was D'Arcy all right, just a little more adult-looking. Behind the wheel was a young man smoking a cigar.

"And that's Jean-Paul, my brother? You knew him as Dodo!"

"Oh, hi. How are you?"

"Whyn't you come to our place? We can get caught up! I thought you went back to living in Leguele...?"

They talked for a few minutes. Finally, D'Arcy handed Esther a slip of paper with her phone number. The car, honking, made its way through the crowd. An eggplant bounced off the roof of the car. The car stopped. Jean-Paul, shirtless and wearing a gold necklace, got out. He inspected the roof, scowling puffs of smoke, muttering in French. As the car sped away, the crowd laughed and chanted a curse.

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After her meeting with Father Alphonse, which came to nothing, Esther happened to find the slip of paper again that she thought she had thrown away. Maybe it was providence. She called the number and learned that D'Arcy's father, Mr Cazale, Minister of Commerce & Industry, was going to be home that night at about eight o'clock.

"You're going there?" Uncle Marten said. "Listen to me. Don't get mixed up with those people. They're druggies. They have all bad sorts at that house. People talk..."

"I know, Uncle."

Esther stood before the mirror. Her image was fractured amid hundreds of geometric shapes. The navy blue apron dress, the one she wore for church, would have to do.

"Cazale is a crook. He's been stealing from the people for years..."

"I know, Uncle."

She put on shell earrings and clipped a white bow in her hair.

"Are you listening to me? I want you to be careful."

"Yes, Uncle."

It amused her that he was acting just like her father had when she announced she was going to the city. Uncle Marten was a reprobate, her father had said. Don't get mixed up with him. The man had spent his younger days with a traveling circus and now, being too old for anything else, eked out a living painting porn for tourists. He was bad news.

"You just be careful."

"I'll be home soon, Uncle."

She kissed him, took up her homemade cake, and caught the next bus going out of town. Gripping the back handle with her free hand, she barely hung on as the bus rattled over the broken streets. The thick air smelled of burning wood and diesel exhaust.

They passed Holy Trinity Cathedral with its ruined tower. The low sun made the church façade look sickly, weak and yellow. In her heart of hearts Esther wasn't sure if she believed in God. How could He let so much suffering happen? How could He watch a whole city get leveled and crush small children under rubble? That's why a visit from the pope would reform not only the outer world, but her spiritual reality as well. It would be proof of something momentous.

The streets, for instance, would become whole again. And only through wholeness would they be able to move forward. With a thrill Esther realized she was doing just that: bringing the fragments of government and church together in order to heal Haiti.

But a voice in her head told her to be careful. And it wasn't just Uncle Marten. She well knew that Minister Cazale would not listen to her automatically. No, she needed leverage, and she had it in the form of her old school magazine--*Kouraj!* In it D'Arcy had written an essay in defense of Paulo Freire and Marxism. Back then, three years ago, they had gone into villages and tried to convert the people to a practical system of resource sharing. D'Arcy had been very enthused about helping the poor, handing out literature and debating anyone she met about the changes needed in society.

The bus entered Pétionville, a wealthy suburb of Port-au-Prince. The roads were now level and smooth; Esther was able to find a seat. She was excited. It was rare for her to see such beautiful homes with their white columns and gold balconies, at least what she could see of them beyond the walls and razor wire.

It was because of her father, and his years of hard work, that had enabled her family to save enough to enroll Esther in a private school in the city, which was where she had met D'Arcy. There was a providence in that too, she told herself as she hopped off the bus and walked up the street. Yes, the hand of God was everywhere.

She was nervous. She was even more nervous than she had been with Father Alphonse and Father Roumain. She stopped to light a cigarette. Shadows of palm trees stretched across the street. Birds wheeled over the bay.

Okay. She put out her cigarette. *They are people, just like us...* Taking a deep breath, she buzzed the gate intercom.

A voice came on, full of static. The gate whirred and swung open. The brick path wound around an ornamental fountain. Esther's heart was beating fast. *Kouraj!*

"Hey, Bunny!"

D'Arcy was up on one of the balconies, twisting her hand. She wore a white chiffon dress and elbow-length gloves. Waiting at the tall front doors, Esther felt slightly foolish holding her cake. A girl in a maid's uniform appeared.

"Come in," said the girl, without smiling.

"Thank you. I'm--?"

"Welcome, welcome!"

D'Arcy trotted into the lobby and kissed Esther on the mouth.

"I brought... ah, cake?"

"Oh, yes! Splendid! Thank you so much, Bunny!"

Esther tried to remember why her nickname in school had been *Bunny*. Was it because she liked carrots?

"What do you think?" D'Arcy looked over her shoulder, striding down the vaulted, echoing hallway. "I was trying them on." She rolled off the gloves. "I'm going to a dance tomorrow!"

"Very nice," Esther murmured. Or because she was a vegetarian?

They traveled through several rooms, some of them bare and others with furniture draped in white. The air smelled slightly sweet, antiseptic. At last they went out to the veranda lined with flowers. Jean-Paul was hunched over a golf club.

"Bunny brought us a cake!"

Wearing suspenders and a purple button-down shirt, Jean-Paul grunted as his putt rolled past the cup.

D'Arcy patted the chair next to her. "Gorgeous day, isn't it?"

"*Oui*," Esther said, sitting. She folded her hands on her purse. "And your house..."

"Dreadful, isn't it? It's like a million years old, built by some old whites who're related to Grandmother, going way back."

"Ah. But no damage...?"

"Oh, yes! The china plates came spilling out of the cabinets in the kitchen. Shattered *everywhere*. But that was probably because someone stacked them wrong, despite I don't know how many times I've told them how to do it properly."

"Beautiful view."

"Not if you look that way," Dodo said. He pointed his club. "They turned the golf course into a fucking shantytown."

D'Arcy laughed. "The great tragedy for Dodo. No more golf for a while."

"And the tennis courts are a hospital!"

"All very necessary," Esther said. "So... I brought something else."

"Oh! What is it?"

Esther took out *Kouraj!* from her purse. She handed it over, her eyes carefully observing D'Arcy.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Isn't this our school that..." D'Arcy stopped flipping through the pages. "Oh! My essay!"

"Yes. Do you remember it?"

D'Arcy scanned the text. Then she burst out laughing. "You little snake! Oh, you little snake!"

"I'm sorry?"

"You're trying to blackmail me with this old thing. Oh, how *funny!*"

"No, no..."

"Why else would you bring it? I could get in *so* much trouble if Father ever saw this. Dodo! Do you remember my essay in that red magazine?"

Jean-Paul swung his club at a hummingbird. "Shoo!"

"This is very serious," Esther said. "I need to talk to your father. And I thought maybe we could talk with him together?"

"Or else you'll tattle on me?"

"No, no, I didn't mean--"

"Oh, it's funny. Relax, Bunny!"

"We can convince him how important it is that I get an interview with Cardinal Cordes. He's the one who--"

D'Arcy was suddenly bewildered. "Cardinal Cordes? I'm sorry, he's...?"

"He's a cardinal, from the church in Rome? But I was hoping to talk with your father about getting--"

The girl in the maid uniform came in with a gadrooned tray, laden with glasses of sparkling water, marrons glacé, dates and figs.

"Thank you, Lovely," D'Arcy said. "We already had our dinner. I hope you...?"

"Yes, thank you. But I can..."

Esther was hungry, having been too nervous to eat the meal her uncle had prepared. She picked up a date.

"They're so sweet and delicious! Dodo, you want one?"

Jean-Paul said nothing, lining up his putt. He missed; he cursed.

"Anything else, ma'am?" the girl said.

"That's all, *mèsi ampil*."

As the girl turned to go, Jean-Paul hooked his club under her skirt. She swatted it down, but shot him a smile as she left.

"Father found her in a dump somewhere," D'Arcy said. "Isn't she a darling? But she can't stack china to save her life."

"When can we see your father? You said he'd be home tonight--"

"We'll work him over, yeah? The old team! You remember when we went into Baradères and that old man yelled at me? Oh, his teeth were grrr-rotisque!"

D'Arcy whispered something to her brother. They both laughed. Esther drank her sparkling water and chewed her date, eyes darting. Shadows deepened on the veranda. Out on the lawn the Haitian flag rustled.

"Let's go to the front room," D'Arcy said. She touched Esther's knee. "Yes? We can see Father come home from there."

They went into a room with a couch and TV and shelves full of leather-bound books.

D'Arcy patted at the couch.

"Father will be here any minute. Come, sit."

"The curtains are closed. We can't..."

"Dodo, dummy, open the curtain! Well, you know, Father doesn't tell us much, especially after a *certain person* blabbed to his friend who works for *Le Nouvelliste*..."

Jean-Paul chuckled as he pulled open the curtain.

"So you're teaching? You were always so serious in school. And I remember you talking about becoming a teacher, yes...?"

"Many of the schools are closed, because of the safety issues, and they're still waiting for the money to re--"

Jean-Paul laughed, gold fillings flashing. "Ha, ha, ha! That's the best thing that's happened, if you ask me! Ha, ha...!"

"Shut up, Dodo."

"Hey, listen. You hear that...?"

"What?"

Jean-Paul waved his club in an arc. "American planes, flying over the city. They're spraying us with chemicals to make everyone obedient. Yeah? Just a matter of time before those fucking bastards make us their colony."

"Oh, hush." D'Arcy was staring at Esther. "That dress... I'm sorry, Bunny, but it makes you look twelve. Here, will you come with me?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Come with me. If you're going to meet Father, you have to look a little more adult, yes? You poor darling! Here..."

D'Arcy took Esther by the hand. She led her into another room with a tall wardrobe cabinet, throwing open the doors to reveal a rainbow of dresses.

"We can start here."

"No, no, I don't..."

"Oh, look at this! Isn't it beautiful? The white would be *very* striking on you!"

For the next thirty minutes Esther allowed herself to be outfitted. Eventually a pile of dresses, along with Esther's original dress, were heaped on the floor. The ultimate one chosen was a champagne empire dress. Esther stood before the full-length mirror: there wasn't a crack in it.

"There! That makes your eyes stand out. You're so pretty now!"

They returned to the room where Jean-Paul was slouched, drinking a beer. He gave Esther a very stupid look, his eyes close together, lips wet. She shuddered. It was the kind of face she saw at the market: base, angry, animalistic.

"You look great," he said.

"I can't accept this," Esther said. "But, thank you?"

"You can bring it back when you visit again," D'Arcy said. She ran her hand along the champagne. "Yes, it looks *perfect*."

"I don't know, I really couldn't, but..."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yes. No."

D'Arcy laughed. "One of those situations, yeah?"

"I mean, I did. But we broke up when I came here. My father wants me to marry him, but for now I just want to..."

"Oh, don't go back to that dirty old farm. It's dirty, isn't it?"

"No, it's nice. But, excuse me... your bathroom...?"

"To your right. And then down the hall."

Esther went out, feeling awkward in the dress, as if wearing someone else's skin. It was dark out, all the windows reflecting the lights. The more she thought about what was happening, seeing the strange vision of herself flash in the windows, the more convinced she was that they were making fun of her. It was all just a joke to them! And, no, Minister Cazale wasn't going to show up. It was just like D'Arcy to be so--

Suddenly she was in the kitchen.

The maidservant girl, Lovely, looked up. She was chopping at a plucked chicken with a giant knife.

"I'm sorry. I don't... The bathroom?"

Lovely waved the knife behind her. "Use ours."

"Thank you."

Esther unzipped the dress with difficulty, sat on the toilet, and then splashed cold water on her face. No, she either had to leave or make it known she wasn't to be trifled with. Demand that she get her interview. The future of Haiti was at stake!

She zipped back up, and passed through the kitchen where Lovely was still hacking. A left, and then a right? She tried a locked door. Which room...? Then she heard something strange.

A child's voice. Maybe two.

It wasn't Lovely. The voice sounded very young. A toddler, maybe.

Esther pressed her ear to the wall.

"Hello?" she said. "Is someone there? Hello?"

She listened. Was someone crying? Sobbing--?

"Oh, there you are!" D'Arcy said. "Are you okay?"

Esther started. "Oh! yes. I was just finishing...?"

D'Arcy steered Esther back to the TV room.

"Come on, let's watch a show...?"

"No," Esther said. "I want to talk to your father. Let's go to his office."

"We can't do that. And why would...?"

"Or do you want me to show him your essay?"

"Ha, ha! Right! The blackmail. Well, you can--"

Just then the room shook; glasses rattled; the walls were rubber, and the chandelier swayed, lights flickering. Esther screamed. Then the rumbling subsided.

"Ha, ha!" Jean-Paul shook his head. "That was a bad one!"

"Yes, but we're okay."

D'Arcy pulled Esther to the couch and sat beside her, stroking her hands.

"It's okay, it's okay. You're with us now. We'll protect you. This house is very strong. Yes? We won't let anything happen to you. All right...? And you're so pretty in that dress--!"

"Sorry, yes, but I think I heard children? In a room, or...?"

"Your scar." D'Arcy smiled and pointed at Esther's lip. "Wasn't that when Boddie hit you on the playground?"

"What? I don't know. I think... It is, yes, but I--"

"You don't have to be scared anymore about the bad people. Yes, darling? Me and Dodo will take care of you. Yes? Come on, now..."

She kissed Esther.

"No, please--"

"Shh, Bunny. Shhh!"

Esther pushed D'Arcy away and jumped for the door, but Jean-Paul caught her and, grunting and laughing, dragged her back to the couch. They both held her down as they pulled off her dress--

"Hold on, hold on!" D'Arcy said, screaming with laughter. She dug her fingers into Esther's sides. "Aren't you ticklish? Come on...! Ha, ha!"

The room rumbled again. Books slipped out of the cabinets and tumbled to the carpet. Lights flickered, and then went off.

Green darkness. Breathing shapes.

"Shit. The power...!"

Esther squirmed free. Stumbling on something--the golf club!--she picked it up and ran, going through dark room after dark room, slamming doors behind her. Out of breath, dizzy, she stopped. Her hand felt along the wall.

Children's voices.

"Hello?"

The voices went silent.

The lights blinked on again. A child babbled, others were crying. Esther hurried to a door, but it only led to a long empty hall. Was that Jean-Paul's voice? She gripped the golf club.

She found herself in the room with the piled dresses. Seeing her purse, she fished out her lighter and set the pile on fire. Flames shot up. Smoke billowed--

"Stop!"

Esther turned. In the firelight, Lovely stood with teeth bared. She held the knife.

"No, no," Esther said. "No, I'm with you--!"

Lovely charged. The knife stuck into Esther's belly. Blood spurted out.

"Ohhh-hh--!"

Clutching her stomach, still gripping the club, Esther ran through the black smoke. She made her way to the front of the house. Jean-Paul stepped in front of her.

"Hey," he said. "Come on. Come with me--"

Shrieking, Esther swung the club and bashed in the side of his head. He fell to the floor. Esther threw down the club and burst outside. Behind her the house burned like a star.

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Naked she staggered. Blood trailed on the sand behind her. The tide threw lace at her feet. A boat appeared.

"Help," she said.

She waded into the jagged luminescence of water. The half-moon, a daub of titanium, was rising. Stars shone brilliant, gold and spiky. Lightning flashed across the viridian expanse of night. The boat came closer. Pennants on poles ruffled with red insignia. A figure appeared over the side. The man's face was underlit, white. He wore a tall hat. As she struggled in the cobalt waves, pearls suspended, the man reached out a hand for her--

Uncle Marten lifted his brush.