

The Painting

I've never liked guided tours in museums. I know it's the best way to understand everything about the painter's techniques and the painter's life etc... but honestly, what's the use ? I don't need anybody to tell me which painting to look at and which painting not to care about. When it comes to art, all you need is a pair of eyes and feelings.

On that spring afternoon, visiting Brooklyn museum with my class, I had told myself I would be a nice girl and listen to the tour guide as we were supposed to and maybe it would be nice after all. But then I saw his pink shirt and huge glasses and heard his horrible high-pitched voice and I immediately changed my mind : that would be the worst guided-tour ever. As things turned out, it actually was.

His awful shirt obsessed me during all the guided tour. Seriously, where is the fashion police when we need it?

Oh but, when I say "all the guided tour" I mean all the time (1 hour 32 minutes exactly) during which I pretended I was a nice and lovely girl. Then I decided to go my own way. I'm sorry for him but honestly, dusty and scary mummies showed by a guide who has learned his speech by heart, checking the hour every 2 minutes to avoid being late because "come on, we don't have much time, hurry up, hurry up !" tend to bore me to death.

Anyway, I decided to go on my own self-guided tour, and I discretely left my classmates to walk away – considering how *adorable* my classmates were, nobody would notice I was missing before quite a long time. So I had much time now to wander among all the great painting galleries of the museum. Now it started to be really interesting.

All those masterpieces! Those huge pictures on which painters had probably spent years working, caring about the littlest details ... In the next room, among all portraits was the portrait, maybe more realistic than the others, of a woman sitting in a garden. By an amazing painting technique I guess, it seemed like her eyes were following you. If it wasn't so beautiful, I admit I would have found it a bit creepy. I continued enjoying the view of other works in the endless galleries. How long did it last? Actually I have no idea. It could have been ages, time didn't matter to me any longer. I only noticed the rooms were getting more and more quiet as there were less and less visitors but at last, the only moment I realised something was wrong was when they turned off the lights. Now I really had to go. But where the hell was the exit? Had I gone too far in the museum to find it quickly? Now I was definitely alone, I started running in this labyrinthine building for a while until I found, at the end of the corridor, this wonderful white door of freedom... closed?!

God, there must have been a mistake somewhere in my life's scenario. Could I possibly be locked in that museum? I'd have to sleep in the museum... haunted by those mummies... there was no other choice anyway.

At least I had time to visit it completely and to stop in front of every picture. I started by the mysterious portrait of the lady with those bewitching eyes. Was I only tired or was it an illusion ? When I arrived near that painting, the woman was now looking on her right, pointing a direction. The title was the same, I couldn't have mistaken. Intrigued, I followed the direction she was pointing at. It led to a room I hadn't even seen in the afternoon, a room that was still, surprisingly lit. That was very strange indeed, because the place was empty apart from a bench in the middle of the room and a lonely painting on the wall in front of it. As this bench seemed to be destined to me, I quietly sat on it and watched the picture. This painting had something fascinating, I was attracted to it, I really wanted to put my finger on it. How childish was that. Anyway, I got closer and closer... after all, nobody could see me and if there was an alarm or something, then I would probably be able to get out from this museum at last. Finally, in a quick move, I put my whole hand on it. What happened then? I couldn't explain it precisely but somehow I ended up... toppling into it. Just like Alice going through the looking glass, I fell into Hopper's Four Lane Road...which had something different though. The house I was in front of now clearly seemed to be abandoned, and I

remembered seeing at least 2 characters there on the painting. Also that forest in the background didn't seem so dark when I saw it at first, and I didn't remember it was barricaded behind railings and barbed wire fences. But the most scary thing probably was the sign where it was written, in big blood-red letters " Danger, no trespassing " with a hole on the wire fences next to it. Suddenly I started to feel cold. I looked at the sky and realized the night was beginning to fall. The frame had disappeared: I could not go back to that now extremely reassuring museum. The only place in which I could possibly be safe was now the abandoned house. I knocked at the door but got no answer. Yet I decided to enter, once again I had no choice. Maybe the house was not *that* empty after all according to the candle that was burning in a corner of the room, just next to the other door.

All of a sudden, the door opened to let a boy come in, he threw chains at me in a hurry and told me "Hurry up, it's too late already! Way too late! we've got to barricade the house before they come! Close the door!". Surprised and scared I couldn't make a move. He reminded me of our guide this afternoon, always in a hurry. But that time there seemed to be an emergency.

"Who's gonna come? " I asked. He looked daggers at me and didn't even answer my question. He just continued putting chain on the windows and I knew I had to do the same with the doors... quickly. I tried to lock it as well as I could but my hands were shaking and I couldn't manage to put the padlock properly, so he had to come and help me. I noticed that, apart from the noise of the chains, everything had turned quite silent. There was no wind any more. No singing bird any more. There was definitely something wrong.

Then, by the second he closed the padlock, the door was shaken by a big blow coming from outside. After staring at each other for a moment, the boy and I decided to walk backward and to hide in the opposite corner of the room silently. He blew the candle and we sat on the floor silently. Maybe if we pretended we were not here, everything would be fine.

We heard other blows on the door, and the noise of a scratch all around the room, it lasted 5 minutes that seemed an eternity. The boy, who had been quite brave so far, started shaking and – how surprising- crying at the same time. " Those... things " he said, " they're coming back every night. They got the old couple, and now they're going to get us too." I wonder what kind of "things" that could be exactly.

I got the answer sooner than expected: that was the kind of "thing" strong enough to break a door. I didn't have the time to see what it looked like exactly, the boy took my hand and took me to the other room. " They know we're here now, we need a better place to hide. Let's go to the cellar, they won't find us here !" He followed me in the dark stairs and closed the door behind us. Once again we sat on the cold floor, in complete darkness that time, and none of us said a word. We were trying to localise the monsters according to the noise they were making. We heard things breaking and falling on the floor. They were probably in the first room already. Oh God, did we close the 2nd door properly? I couldn't possibly go back upstairs to check now. The only thing I could do was hoping it was.

Apparently, whether the door was closed or not, they eventually understood that there was a second room: we heard the steps of the creatures right above us now. They were pacing up and down and it was like every step was bringing us closer to our premature death.

Then came a long and agonizing silence. Had they left the place? Were we finally free and safe? I stood up but the boy pushed me back on the floor. " Not now" He said.

Everything became even more silent. Whether he liked it or not, I was definitely going to stand up once again and get out of there. But before I could make a move, we both heard a creaking noise: the cellar door was slowly, very slowly opening. With the light of the room above, all the wall on the left was lit by the moonlight, even the boy's eyes were shining like cats' eyes. He looked at me one last time, as if to say it really was the end now, and turned back his head to see the huge shadows of the creatures creeping downstairs slowly and then rushing to the boy. Fortunately I was in darkest spot and they hadn't seen me... yet.

He screamed and cried and called for help but I was paralysed. They were ripping things from him, I hope it was only his clothes but I could swear I saw one of his hands too far away from the rest of his body. Maybe it was just a glove. Was he even wearing gloves? I couldn't remember, I really couldn't remember.

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But then I had another problem to solve. What was this noise just next to me? This kind of loud breathing, the loud breathing of a huge animal. It was certainly going to smell my body. Why had I put on so much perfume that morning?

Then I heard a hoarse growling and I saw a black – what was it? arm ? paw ? – raising in the air. Then its hand went back down and scratched my cheek so violently that I fell on the floor.

And suddenly, I felt all my body being snatched behind, every single cell of my body fighting to stay here with that boy, to help him, save him... Then, the fall, the endless fall in an abyss that seemed colder and colder, darker and darker. I couldn't feel anything at all, my memories were shading off already. Then my eyes opened, I was blinded by the light. I felt the comforting heat of wood under my fingers, but where was I that time? Slowly, I started to hear a soft noise and I found myself inside a crowd in which many voices were whispering in various languages, some of them I didn't even know existed. Then came this smell... a smell of coffee, the smell of a city but above all , the smell of Art, of those masterpieces that had seen and had been seen by so many people from all over the world. Then my eyes started to get used to the light and in front of me, the painting... the painting that reminded me of everything, the memories started rushing into my head, my class, the museum, the empty gallery... and this strange dream, the four lane road and the darkest forest I had ever seen, and that boy... But it all seemed so far away, as if it was years before, just like a dream. Yes, definitely, it was a dream, a very realistic dream... but still, only a dream. I had probably fallen asleep the night before on that bench.

I looked at the painting again, wondering why I had stopped in front of it in the first place, then I felt my mobile phone vibrating in my pocket: "Mom, 12 missed calls ". Okay now, I was in serious trouble. I rushed out to go back home.

But if I had not looked back on the bench, I didn't notice the scratch in the wood, and the little drops of blood flowing from the frame ...

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