



All Mine **By Deborah Batterman**

1.

I was fascinated by her beauty, he says. Even now—especially now—he thinks about the first time he laid eyes on her.

I was fascinated by her beauty, by the qualities of the woman in the portrait, he says. To anyone who asks.

And by her eyes, he adds. Especially her eyes.

Which reminded me of my grandmother.

2.

The girlfriend stands against a turret, looking out at the valley below. She takes a wedge of cheese from her satchel, breaks off a piece, nibbles at it. Like a mouse. It is, after all, largely the reason she came along. *Gruyere*, he said, opening the car door for her. *Let's take a drive to Gruyere*. Her mouth waters at the thought of that nutty cheese, fresh from the farm, as she settles herself into the car. *Maybe today's the day*, she thinks. A little wine, some fresh bread and cheese. A picnic on some grassy knoll overlooking the town. *Maybe today's the day he'll ask*.

3.

The mother closes the drapes against the late afternoon sun, takes one last glimpse at the maple tree outside the window. It is early autumn and the treetop is just beginning to sparkle red. Her son has asked her to do this for him when he is not around—close the curtains to keep out the sun. He does not want the light to harm his treasures, especially the paintings. She shakes her head. *Just like his father*, she thinks. Across the foyer, the parlor hums with the sound of the television, reassuring in the way it palliates the unease that seems to grow each time he unwraps something new from wherever he has been. Paintings. Glassware. China. *Souvenirs*, he calls them, from his travels around Europe. *Gifts*, he says, from the people he works for. As a boy, he loved collecting—bottle caps, marbles, silly archeological objects. *Just like his father*, she thinks. She sighs, settles back in the overstuffed club chair positioned directly across from the painting of the woman he says reminds him of his grandmother.

4.

Do you love me? he asks the girlfriend. She nods. *Then wait right here, and don't say a word*. He has taken her inside the castle, stationed her on the threshold of a room filled with paintings.

Nearby a guard snores in his chair. *Maybe now*, she thinks. *Maybe here*. He tells her to keep her eye on the guard, instructs her to signal if he moves or wakes up. He'll be quick, he says. She does not know what he is up to, only suspects it is the real reason he has filled her with wine and cheese in the exquisite beauty of the Swiss countryside.

5.

He feels a rush, a giddiness, that tells him what he has to do. He takes his Swiss army knife from his pocket, opens the blade, and with a deftness he did not even know he had, carefully traces it along the edge of the frame. Releasing her.

It was so easy, he later thinks, clutching his Swiss army knife, the blade retracted now, in his sweaty palm. *Too easy*.

When he is home, in the safety of his room, he unrolls the painting, shows it to his girlfriend.

I was fascinated by her beauty, by the qualities of the woman in the portrait, he says. *And by her eyes*. Which reminded him of his grandmother.

6.

You're crazy, says his mother when he holds up the painting, framed now, against the wall of his room. *She looks nothing like your grandmother*. He ignores her, begins stringing wire and hammering at nails. After which he leaves the house, still saying nothing. *Just like his father*, she thinks, recalling the morning, years ago, when her husband stole out of the house, no note, not a word, with his prized collection of antique guns. Everything else—the old brass lamps, the tea sets from England and vases from China (so she thought)—he left behind. She was angry with him for leaving like that, so suddenly, even angrier to discover how little what he'd left was really worth, though she was relieved to get rid of all those antiques needing so much care, so much delicate dusting. She looks around the room, for an instant sees a young boy on the floor playing with marbles. She shakes her head, her eyes settling on dust motes making a channel from the window to the very center of the room where a pair of chalices sits on a table. She picks one up, cups it in her hand. Real silver and gold, of that she is sure. *Where does he get these things?* He does okay as a waiter, but these *objets (souvenirs?)* and the paintings—they look too expensive for him to afford. *Where does he get them?* Something—the way he hurries past her, another painting in his arms, ready to be hung in the room he has known since he was a boy—prevents her from asking questions she is not all that sure she wants the answers to.

7.

Do you love me? asks the girlfriend. He nods, kisses her on the cheek, tells her he could not do this without her. If it's true that a person can glow from the inside, then she is all aglow. Bright yellow. *He needs me*, she thinks. And that is even better than love. They are in Basel today, and she is standing sentry outside of small room in a small museum. *Maybe they'll make a movie about us someday, like that American one, 'Bonnie and Clyde.'* The walls, dark blue, suddenly make her think of the sky on a stormy winter day. There are paintings, some landscapes

and seascapes along with portraits of men who frighten her with their accusing eyes. She turns away, looks down a hallway, half expects to see ghosts pop out from nowhere. A chill runs through her and she rubs her arms. Antwerp. Montpellier. Blois. Wherever he leads, she follows. Whatever he takes she makes no claim to. She is along for the ride, the thrill of the dare, the hope to which she hangs on. He is a man who has perfected the art of seeming to be something he is not, a master of gaining access. All it takes, she thinks, is an expensive suit, a winning smile, and a deftness so smooth she believes he was born with it.

Augsburg. Gruyere (again), Baden-Baden. She asks no questions, silence being an acquired skill that makes her take note, with greater attention, to the chill that comes from nowhere, the white clouds that make the leaves on a high branch in a still life seem to sway, the floors that creak (she believes) with the spirits of the dead who once lived in these rooms. Now, when she sees him emerge from the interior of the room with a small violin, she is reminded of the time she took a barrette from a hook at a local department store, stuck it in her pocket and walked out without getting caught. It was too small a theft, an item never missed, of that she felt sure. But the exhilaration, of what she'd gotten away with, made her feel as if she'd walked off with nothing less than the Hope diamond.

8.

The mother paces through her house, when she is alone, talking to herself. Muttering. Cursing. Calling him by his father's name. She can hardly speak above a whisper, feels as if someone's long, bony fingers are always around her neck. *Can a person choke from surroundings?* she asks herself. The curtains, almost always closed now, have turned her into a cave dweller always on the verge of suffocating from the air, stale with cigarette smoke and the residue of antiquity. Every which way she turns is something she knows does not belong to her. Every which way she turns is the face of someone she does not know.

She looks over at the ones who arrived the other day, the two men in a painting she thinks she recognizes from the evening news. *Watteau—was that the painter?* She takes a closer look at where it is signed, sees the signature of Antoine Watteau. She lights another cigarette, stares at the two men—*will they squeal, tell her son she was smoking in here?* She inhales deeply, stamps out the cigarette in a small sugar dish already filled with cigarette butts. She takes the dish from the room, to wash it out, clear away all traces of her presence. As she leaves, she hears a voice, turns to see which one is calling to her. It's a game, and she knows they are taunting her. *Hide-and-go-seek*, she thinks, though the game is one of sound, not sight. Only when she turns her back on them do they start to whisper, call her name. Making her feel as if she is never alone anymore, in her own house.

9.

She was sitting in here, smoking, his Goldilocks. She always cleans up, he knows that, but cigarette smoke takes more than a few hours to clear out of a room. Sometimes the smell never leaves, and he has grown to forgive her without ever saying so. Forgiveness would take her transgression out of the clandestine realm, force a dialogue that would ultimately go nowhere.

It's best for him if she thinks she is secretly doing something he does not like. Secrets are what they survive on.

He rests his head against the back of his armchair, closes his eyes, thinks about the secrets filling this room, spilling over into the adjoining one. This is a game he likes to play, sitting by himself, a game of association. There is no guessing here. He turns his head in any direction, and knows, even before opening his eyes, what they will focus on. To the left *Sybille, Princesse of Cleves* alongside a Watteau. To the right *Madeleine of France, Queen of Scots*, hanging next to his Breughel. And straight ahead his first, still his favorite, the small Dietrich painting of a woman with the captivating eyes of his grandmother. Even without the resemblance, he would love this portrait. She was his first. *His*. The word hisses through his head, possessing him. All his, collected and catalogued. A dizzying seven years' worth of sneaking into rooms in small museums—France and Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Austria—pin marks now on a map of his own making. Spiriting away anything he wanted. Dishes and goblets. Pistols and daggers. Statuettes and paintings. Over two hundred pieces in all, two hundred and thirty-eight, to be exact.

It was easy, he would say. Too easy.

He glances over at Boucher's *Sleeping Shepherd*. Something about the landscape, so pastoral, makes him think of the View-Master his father gave him when he was a boy, his initiation into the language of art, the magic of perspective. Forest scenes that lured him into their darkness. Sunsets turning clouds into mountains. Van Gogh swirling the night sky with stars. All up against his eye, turning two dimensions into three.

A soft moan ripples through his body. *All mine.*

10.

Today is the day she will tell him. *No more*. She has had it with the sneaking through doors, standing guard, listening to his delusionary tale of love. *They need me more than I need them*, he tells her, as he cleans and restores what he claims. Today he is cleaning off a bugle, his last acquisition, and she tastes the words—*no more*—rolls them around on her tongue. She would like to relieve herself of the bitterness, spit out the two little words. But she finds herself transfixed, watching him, a fine cloth in his hand moving along the tube of the instrument, curved like a snake coiling in on itself. She tells him about a dream she had last night, in which she heard the sound of a bugle. A warning, she thinks. He laughs, kisses her on the forehead. Tells her dreams are fodder for fools. There is something else, not dreams, that he wants. *Tomorrow we go back to Lucerne*. She closes her eyes, her head filling with the sound of the bugle, two notes transposed into words she cannot say. *He needs me*, she thinks. *More than he even knows. And that is better than love.*

11.

Merdre, whispers his mother. She has gotten word of his arrest and is beside herself. *Merdre*, she mutters. She is in his room, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Hearing voices that tell her what she has to do. She goes to the kitchen, gets scissors and knives. Begins slashing. Tearing things from walls. Filling bags with goblets and dishes, daggers and pistols, statuettes and now shredded paintings. Carrying them to the canal and tossing them in.

12.

He sits in court listening. *Obsessive*, one expert says. *Compulsive*, says another. Words glide by, like skaters on ice, nothing he chooses to grasp. Until he hears the wrong word, the one that incorrectly describes a piece of art he has, with total recall, named to the authorities. Then he is up from his seat, correcting them. Berating them for their sloppy cataloguing and reminding them that he was going to give everything back, eventually. Or when he hears his attorney say those strange words, *fraudulent removal*, claiming a lesser crime than theft. The law is not built on metaphor but here he sits, with his entire defense resting on a phrase pitted with allusion and motive. A phrase he thinks sounds like the title of a painting, or a story. *He kept all the art at home, never planning to reap any reward, other than the joy of looking at it, day in and day out. Hence, whatever guilt he is found with belongs to a crime of lesser degree.* He looks down at his bandaged wrists, for which he blames his mother and the unspeakable act that can never hold forgiveness. He would like to ask her what she was thinking but the silence between them is a barrier now, sealed forever by this crime of hers, which insults all humanity. And for his crime—no more than acts of passion, really—whatever punishment is meted out cannot be any worse than what the doctors have done, in not allowing him to die.

He hears words—*obsessive compulsive, pathological*—all in the interest of defending what he knows is indefensible. *I collected out of love and kept all that I collected at home*, he hears himself say. *The distracted guard, either absent or asleep in his chair, made it easy. Too easy.*

They needed me more than I needed them.

He is struck now by his own words, past tense like a knife cutting through his flesh. He looks around the courtroom, the dark paneled walls swallowing him, muting all sound, making him feel as if he is underwater now. Pieces of Sybille here, and Madeleine there, and shepherds floating in chalices, indistinguishable now. Except for one, his first, always his favorite. The woman whose eyes remind him of his grandmother.