

The Side of the Light

On rainy days, Eleanor liked to haunt the galleries. The National Gallery was kind to older feet: wide benches, patient elevators, warm air, and the permanent knowledge that paintings outlast weather. She would walk through rooms of saints and churned seas and Paris light and Dutch bowls, until she reached Turner's sun blazing over a sea that had never presided over anyone's damp umbrella. She always stopped there, because the light was not a painted thing so much as a decision. Go toward it, and the room brightens.

She was seventy-four, three years retired from a long career teaching literature at a comprehensive. Ten years widowed. Her friends teased her that she had moved into phases: the opera phase, the yoga phase (short), the sourdough phase (catastrophic), and now the museum phase.

"At least this one doesn't make the kitchen explode," her daughter Laurel had observed dryly. On days like this, Eleanor set her umbrella in the big stand near the cloakroom and moved through carefully, grateful for the stiffness in her knees that kept her slow enough to see.

She was seated on a bench opposite Turner's "The Fighting Temeraire" when a man sat at the other end, shaking rain from his hair almost apologetically, as if the weather were a personal failing. He was forty or a generous forty-two at most, jacket damp around the shoulders, a satchel tucked against his shin. He might have been a father escaping somewhere between nursery pickup and the long commute; he might have been an architect. He might have been anyone.

He stayed there, looking at the painting, for longer than most. Then, sensing what she would have called in her classroom a moment of inciting incident, he tilted his head toward her without looking.

“Do you think it’s sad,” he asked, “or triumphant?”

She turned. The thin gold rim of his glasses gave him an earnest, boyish seriousness. His features were handsome in the modest, careful way of men who assemble their lives with attention. His mouth was serious, but his eyes had a curve of mischief in them, as if they were prepared to laugh given permission.

“Sometimes sad,” she said. “Sometimes not. Look how the old ship is lit from behind. It’s a send-off. The tug looks like a beetle by comparison. It’s heroic, but small - like most things, in the end.”

He smiled. “So, both.”

“Like my students used to say: why can’t it be both?”

“I’m Tom,” he said, holding out his hand in a gesture that was surprisingly formal and awkward, as if he had forgotten how people introduced themselves. His palm was cold from the outside.

“Eleanor.” Her own hand surprised her by lifting easily.

They let the painting have its silence again after that. The ship, pale and spectral, moved toward its breaking down; the tug laboured; the sky pulled light into itself like breath.

“I come here to think,” Tom said.

“I come here not to think,” she replied, and he laughed out loud.

“You asked a good question,” she said. “Most people ask where the toilets are.”

“And they’re never where you expect them to be,” he said. “In galleries or in life.”

He remained beside her until his phone vibrated. He looked down, a frown easing across his face, then smoothing again. “I have to go,” he said apologetically. “I promise I’m not a phone person. But if I don’t fetch my nephew on time, the childminder looks at me like I have personally dismantled the welfare state.”

“You’d better run,” she said.

He stood, slinging his bag across his body, then hesitated.

“Are you here often?”

“Often enough,” she said.

“I restore frames,” he said suddenly, as if that explained everything. “Well, I run a small restoration workshop. Gold leaf, gesso, that sort of thing. I come here to get something in my eye that isn’t Instagram. If...” He flushed, surprising himself and her. “If you wanted to see the workshop sometime... No obligation. I mean, you don’t need me to show you frames – clearly you have your own life. God, ignore me. I’m being...”

“Earnest?” she suggested.

“Catastrophically forward”

“Catastrophically forward would involve an accordion and a serenade under my window,” she said dryly. “This is merely an invitation.”

His eyes widened, and then he laughed again, the kind of quick, surprised laugh she hadn’t heard from a stranger in years. He tore a small card from his wallet and handed it to her. THOMAS BRENNAN RESTORATIONS, the print read. An address in Islington. A phone number. A tiny, stamped crown.

“Crowns are good for business,” he said, embarrassed. “People like to feel their pictures are being treated like royalty.”

“Are you sure you’re not a poet?” she asked.

“God, no,” he said. “I just stick things back together.”

After he left, she sat a while longer, aware of the card in her pocket like a warm coin. The ship kept moving towards its dismantling. When she stood to leave, she found his umbrella leaning awkwardly on the bench. It was an old one, the kind of black, sturdy thing that men inherit from uncles. The handle was worn smooth. She took it home.

Her daughter called that evening to ask, in the tone adult children adopt with their parents, if she had eaten enough. “There’s a new place on the high street that does those salads you like,” Laurel said. In the background, a child wailed. “Mum?”

“I had soup,” Eleanor lied, ignoring the tin of sardines on the counter. “A good soup.”

“You sound chirpy,” Laurel said with suspicion.

“I had a nice morning at the gallery,” Eleanor replied. “There was a boy who knew how to look at a painting.”

“Oh God,” Laurel said. “Are you picking up men at the National Gallery now? It’s very French widow of you.”

“I am not picking up anyone,” Eleanor said, and felt, absurdly, like she was fifteen. “He left his umbrella.”

“Uh-huh,” Laurel said. “That old line.”

After she hung up, Eleanor made herself toast, broke the sardines with a fork, and ate standing up with the kitchen radio playing.

The next morning was dry. She considered going to the workshop immediately, then scolded herself for eagerness and went about her errands: to the post office, where the man behind the counter had begun to call her dear in the voice he used for everyone over fifty and the greengrocer's, who saved the small tomatoes for her. By afternoon, the restraint felt false. Theatrical.

She took the 43 bus to Islington.

Thomas Brennan Restorations lived in a small factory building tucked behind a courtyard. Out front, a trug of lavender drooped as if suffering some private melancholy. Inside, light from a skylight fell in clean squares, leaving dust to think slowly. The room smelled of wood, glue, and a sweetness like sugar.

A young woman with a halo of small tattoos around one wrist looked up from a workbench. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I've...I mean, do you employ a man named Thomas?"

The young woman's face broke into a grin as if the day had suddenly produced a surprise she hadn't expected. "He's in the back. You must be Eleanor." "How..."

"He told he'd met someone who could actually look at Turner without taking a selfie. He said you might come. Tom?" she shouted.

He came around the corner, hair a little wilder, a smear of something white on his cheekbone. He stopped as if the room had given him a present.

"You came," he said, more surprised than pleased, and because that was better

than anything else, she smiled.

“I brought your umbrella,” she said, holding it out.

“Thank you,” he said, taking it like a relic. He seemed to resist the impulse to say something gallant and failed.

He showed her the workbench as if it were a small private theatre. The frames were not glamorous. He sanded a small patch of gesso, mixed glue and chalk to a creamy thickness, and applied it smoothly. He pressed gold leaf onto a prepared corner with a fat brush like something a child might use, whispering as he breathed not to disturb the thin metal. The leaf clung, trembling. He showed her cracks, the way old glue spoke a different language than new, the art of invisibility.

“My mum does the books,” the tattooed woman chirped, “and I paint in the missing bits when the gilding has those little voids. We don’t tell clients that because they like to pretend everything is a secret alchemy.”

He asked then, over a flurry of small apologetic gestures that made her want to smooth his hair, if she wanted tea. She watched him in the small kitchen area, pouring water into mismatched mugs. “I don’t store sugar,” he said, “because I’m vain about my teeth.”

“I once had a student who took four sugars,” she said. “He graduated with a first-class degree and ten fillings.”

“Seems proportionate,” he said.

The tea was too strong and perfect. They stood shoulder to shoulder, looking up through the skylight.

“What did you teach?” he asked.

“Books. Literature,” she said. “I told children that stories would save them. I think sometimes they do.”

“I was saved by glue,” he said. “And my mother. And then a man who taught me how to hold a chisel.”

“Fathers are useful for that,” she said.

“Mine wasn’t there,” he replied gently. “But I got a good uncle. Gave me the umbrella you rescued, actually. He said every man should own one decent umbrella and one decent apology.”

“And do you?” she asked.

“I own one decent umbrella,” he said. “I’m practising the other.”

They began, without planning, to see each other. London supplied them with places that were unassuming. Generous. They went to a matinee where the actors spoke in the flat vowels of youth and then found themselves drinking coffee in a bakery where the croissants dared you to count the layers. He asked what she liked in her life now. She said: learning new bus routes, strawberries in season, the way the neighbour’s cat threw its whole heart into sleeping, text messages from Laurel with photos of her grandson asleep in improbable positions, the sudden way grief could grip the throat years later and then loosen again. He said: walking home late after locking up the workshop, the satisfying heaviness of a book about a subject you know nothing about, the brief shock on people’s faces when a frame looks new again.

“Do you have children?” she asked once, and regretted the question, for it would always summon a particular ghost. But he seemed untroubled.

“No,” he said. “I had plans with someone that included them. The someone left.

The plan stayed awhile and then went too. That was years ago.”

He learned her daughter’s life, too: how Laurel worried professionally and personally, practised law with a ferocity that made Eleanor want to cheer and occasionally lie down.

They touched accidentally and then on purpose. He would place his hand on the small of her back to guide her through a crowd, and the heat would send a slight astonishment up her spine. She began to notice the way his fingers had all those fine cuts and the small callus on his middle finger where tools rested. Once, in the gallery, he leaned to say something and the breath from his mouth touched the whorl of her ear, and she thought she might forget how to stand.

She was not giddy - giddiness was for other ages, other movies. She told no one for a while. She tried the reality on like an exquisite coat in a shop, not looking in the mirror because looking might change the fit.

Then, a month into their companionship, Laurel found out. This was Eleanor’s fault. She left Tom’s card out on the dining table, the crown catching the sun.

“What’s this?” Laurel asked, stopping by between court and nursery pickup. Her hair was pulled back with a ferocity that had frightened teachers since she was thirteen.

“A restorer,” Eleanor said mildly. “He makes old frames new.”

“Yes, I can read,” Laurel said, and then flipped the card over and found where someone had written, in pencil, “Turner this Wednesday?” She raised her eyebrows. “Mum?”

“There’s no rule against friends at my age,” Eleanor said. It came out more defensive than she intended.

“No,” Laurel said slowly. “No. Of course not. It’s just - he’s...” She seemed to run out of adjectives and emotion at the same time.

“He’s forty-two,” Eleanor said, because the truth is easier to look at when you use numbers. “Approximately.”

Laurel stared. “Mum,” she said, “are you okay?”

Eleanor put her hand flat on the table to keep herself still. “I am okay,” she said. “I am more than okay. I am ... happy.”

Laurel made a slight sound that could have been a laugh or a sob, and turned it into a cough. “Right,” she said briskly, like a woman who has been given an unexpected brief. “All right. Fine. He’s not...”

“He is kind,” Eleanor said. “He listens. We go to the pictures. We talk about bread and glue and why people stand the way they do in paintings. He does not make me feel like an obligation or a miracle, just a person. I am still your mother. Those things have not changed. I did not plan this. I am sorry for the surprise.”

Laurel looked at her for a long time, as if trying to calibrate this new world. She was, Eleanor knew better than anyone, good at new worlds.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Okay. I would like to meet him, on purpose, and not as a surprise in a courtroom hallway while he’s carrying your shopping. And I reserve the right to be irrationally cross on random days about the fact that I will possibly have to explain to strangers that my mother is dating a man who is closer to my age than hers”, her barrister’s voice trying to keep level with her daughter voice.

“Of course,” Eleanor said, laughter running like clean water through her chest. “You may be cross nicely.”

“Cross with conditions,” Laurel muttered. “All right. Fine. Jesus. Mum.” She came around the table impulsively and pressed her forehead to Eleanor’s temple, the way she had done as a little girl. “Don’t let anyone be unkind to you about this.”

“I won’t. We could go to the gallery together,” she said, drawing back. “You can make faces at Turner.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Laurel said, straightening. “I’ll bring my best scowl.”

Tom was quieter after meeting Laurel, as if he had been weighed and found either wanting or exact.

“She’s fierce,” he said finally.

“She came that way,” Eleanor said.

“She looked at me like a piece of furniture,” he said, half-amused. “She was checking for wobble.”

“She will tighten your screws, if necessary,” Eleanor said. “Often when not necessary.”

“I liked her,” he said.

“She will not forgive you if you hurt me,” Eleanor said.

“I will not forgive me either,” he said, and that was the sort of sentence that is a promise even if it isn’t one.

It was not all light. The world contained mirrors. A waiter glanced at Tom when they sat down, then at Eleanor, and made a small calculation that settled on his face like condescension. A friend of Eleanor’s, when told, performed a complicated expression that mixed delight and alarm.

“Be careful,” the friend said. “One shouldn’t be taken advantage of.”

“I have not been taken advantage of for some time,” Eleanor said gently, and the friend blushed.

Her body had a say too. Desire was not the slick, natural thing of Ann Summers and perky magazines. It was awkward, huge, and so tender she could barely speak for it. She told him, the first time he touched her chest with reverence as if it were a thing with a history, that he was allowed to look and to kiss and perhaps to call her beautiful if he wished, but not to pretend youth.

She told him she had surgical scars that could pass for tiny maps, that her knees were not the originals, that she had not, in years, been this easily undone.

He listened to all of that as if she were telling him where a crown moulding was weak. “Okay,” he said. “We will mind the joints.”

They were careful. They were foolish. He laughed in bed the way he laughed on the bench, surprised and grateful. She found a part of herself that had been standing aside with a polite smile at parties and discovered it could dance.

And yet. After the matinees, after the friends who whispered, there were nights when she lay awake because love is bright, yes, but it is also blinding. The arithmetic was not kind. She had thirty years on him. If she were lucky, if luck continued to attend, there would be years, more than anyone had any right to. If luck looked elsewhere, she would run out. She would become, sooner rather than later, a set of requirements: handrails for getting out of bed, chairlifts, a daily pill box in the kitchen, and a diary of appointments with doctors.

One evening, with rain on the window, she told him this.

“I look at the calendar,” she said, “and I see a cliff.”

“I look at the calendar,” he said, “and I see next Wednesday. And two Wednesdays after that. And then July. And somewhere in there, we go back to Turner, and you tell me again why the tug is a beetle. That’s as far as I can manage.”

They went on like this, accumulating Wednesdays. They started small projects: a list on the fridge of things they would cook together. A list of words they loved. A list of things they refused (regret). He took her to his workshop after hours and let her lay a leaf of gold with her clumsy patient fingers; it stuck scarcely where she wanted it and everywhere else. She watched him sand a frame and thought that human beings were ridiculous and divine because they insisted that beauty could be repaired.

One night she sprained her ankle stepping off a curb she had navigated for forty years. It wasn’t dramatic. She did it sober, in good shoes, at a sensible hour.

Pain arrived like someone officious and took charge. She limped home, refused her neighbour’s offer of a lift to A&E, and called Tom.

He arrived like a man trying very hard not to sprint. He helped her to the sofa, fetched ice with a competence that made her absurdly proud, and arranged pillows as if tucking in a small, revered emperor. He called Laurel, endured her fierce fussing politely, made tea, made jokes, made space for the silence that arrives when pain is finally eased.

“I was frightened,” she admitted, breaking the silence.

“Of what?” he asked, stroking the top of her foot very lightly.

“Of not being able to call you,” she said. “Of the interlude ending.”

“The interlude?” he said, mock offended. “We are the main event.”

She reached for his face then, and it was not some cinematic rush but a slow, graceful placing of palm to cheek.

“I have fallen in love with you,” she said calmly, like a woman reading the weather.

He stilled. He seemed to take the sentence like he took gold leaf, leaving room for breath. His eyes - oh, those eyes - shone in a way that made her youth sit up and look around.

“I have fallen in love with you, too,” he said, and then laughed. “There,” he said. “We have said the thing.”

The days changed, but not in the way people on television say they do. There were no montage sequences of racing through Paris hand in hand. The lift mechanic was coming to repair the lift in her building and asking them cheerfully how long they’d been together. There was Laurel coming for dinner and bringing an impossible rhubarb tart from a place that required knees and money to queue and saying, almost casually, that she had told a friend about them. The friend had said, “Good for your mum,” in a tone that on another day would have made Eleanor want to eat the person’s complacent face and that on this day made her shrug.

Spring came, and the city did that English thing where it pretended surprise. Eleanor woke with her ankle healed and her old restlessness humming.

“Let’s go somewhere,” she announced.

“Somewhere other than Dalston?” he said, alarmed and thrilled. “Somewhere with sea,” she said.

They took a train that took longer than the map suggested. They arrived at a shingled beach where the sky occupied most of the world, and the fish and chips came in portions designed for men who worked outside. The wind bullied them until they laughed. She took

off her shoes and rolled her trousers to wade; the cold made her yip like a puppy. He waded in with her.

They sat on a bench eating chips with their fingers until the paper was translucent.

He leaned back and watched the sky making slow decisions with its clouds.

“I know love isn’t a prize,” he said. “I know it doesn’t come because you deserve it or because you’ve waited. It just arrives like the weather. But I want to say it anyway: I feel... very lucky.”

She reached for his greasy hand, and they sat like that, two people with salt in their hair and vinegar in their throats and a feeling that needn’t be named more than it already had.

Back in London, July rushed them along. She went to her old school on Speech Day. When she emerged, Tom was waiting on the pavement, holding flowers. It was his weakness, she had learned: he wanted to fetch her whenever he could, to be there at thresholds.

“You did not need to bring me roses,” she said.

“They’re not roses,” he said. “They’re peonies. They’re ridiculous and correct.”

They kissed on the street like people who did not care.

In July, they returned to the gallery. They sat on their bench and let the painting do its old work. Time, which had been their enemy in some ways, sat down between them with its hands folded.

He reached for her hand, threaded their fingers together, and then leaned to murmur,

“I thought of you when I fixed a rail today. The customer kept saying, ‘I know it can’t be made new, but can it be made good?’”

“And what did you say?” she asked.

“I said, ‘Yes,’” he said. “And then I did it.”

She lifted their joined hands and held them against her lips. “Everything ends,” she said, because she could not stop being an old woman who had watched endings.

“Everything ends,” he agreed, because he was not interested in pretend. “And until then, look.” He nodded at the painting. “That ship is moving on the side of the light.”

On the way out, passing through the gift shop, they stopped and bought a postcard of 'The Fighting Temeraire'. At the till, the woman said, “Do you have a membership?” and Eleanor said, “No, but we are members of each other,” and the woman said, “That’s two pounds fifty.”

They taped the postcard to her kitchen wall with ugly blue tape because that was what they had to hand. It crooked a little. They laughed and left it crooked. The kettle boiled. He set cups out. She cut lemons for pancakes that they would make for dinner, because dinner could be anything.

Later, the night-light would lie on the postcard and awaken the paint as if from a sleep.

For now, they ate pancakes, lemon, and sugar, cuddled up on the sofa, talking with their hands. For now, they were ridiculous and correct. For now, the ship was moving not toward an end but into light.

ENDS