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The Goldfinch



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i.

A WILDERNESS OF GILT, gleaming in the slant from the dust-furred windows: gilded cupids, gilded commodes and torchieres, and—undercutting the old-wood smell—the reek of turpentine, oil paint, and varnish. I followed him through the workshop along a path swept in the sawdust, past pegboard and tools, dismembered chairs and claw-foot tables sprawled with their legs in the air. Though a big man he was graceful, "a floater," my mother would have called him, something effortless and gliding in the way he carried himself. With my eyes on the heels of his slippered feet, I followed him up some narrow stairs and into a dim room, richly carpeted, where black urns stood on pedestals and tasseled draperies were drawn against the sun.

At the silence, my heart went cold. Dead flowers stood rotting in the massive Chinese vases and a shut-up heaviness overweighed the room: the air almost too stale to breathe, the exact, suffocating feel of our apartment when Mrs. Barbour took me back to Sutton Place to get some things I needed. It was a stillness I knew; this was how a house closed in on itself when someone had died.

All at once I wished I hadn't come. But the man—Hobie—seemed to sense my misgiving, because he turned quite suddenly. Though he wasn't a young man he still had something of a boy's face; his eyes, a childish blue, were clear and startled.

"What's the matter?" he said, and then: "Are you all right?"

His concern embarrassed me. Uncomfortably I stood in the stagnant, antique-crowded gloom, not knowing what to say.

He didn't seem to know what to say either; he opened his mouth; closed it; then shook his head as if to clear it. He seemed to be around fifty or sixty, poorly shaven, with a shy, pleasant, large-featured face neither handsome nor plain—a man who would always be bigger

than most of the other men in the room, though he also seemed unhealthy in some clammy, ill-defined way, with black-circled eyes and a pallor that made me think of the Jesuit martyrs depicted in the church murals I'd seen on our school trip to Montreal: large, capable, death-pale Europeans, staked and bound in the camps of the Hurons.

"Sorry, I'm in a bit of a tip . . ." He was looking around with a vague, unfocused urgency, as my mother did when she'd misplaced something. His voice was rough but educated, like Mr. O'Shea my History teacher who'd grown up in a tough Boston neighborhood and ended up going to Harvard.

"I can come back. If that's better."

At this he glanced at me, mildly alarmed. "No, no," he said—his cufflinks were out, the cuff fell loose and grubby at the wrist—"just give me a moment to collect myself, sorry—here," he said distractedly, pushing the straggle of gray hair out of his face, "here we go."

He was leading me towards a narrow, hard-looking sofa, with scrolled arms and a carved back. But it was tossed with pillow and blankets and we both seemed to notice at the same time that the tumble of bedding made it awkward to sit.

"Ah, sorry," he murmured, stepping back so fast we almost bumped into each other, "I've set up camp in here as you can see, not the best arrangement in the world but I've had to make do since I can't hear properly with all the goings-on . . ."

Turning away (so that I missed the rest of the sentence) he sidestepped a book face-down on the carpet and a teacup ringed with brown on the inside, and ushered me instead to an ornate upholstered chair, tucked and shirred, with fringe and a complicated button-studded seat—a Turkish chair, as I later learned; he was one of the few people in New York who still knew how to upholster them.

Winged bronzes, silver trinkets. Dusty gray ostrich plumes in a silver vase. Uncertainly, I perched on the edge of the chair and looked around. I would have preferred to be on my feet, the easier to leave.

He leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees. But instead of saying a word he only looked at me and waited.

"I'm Theo," I said in a rush, after much too long a silence. My face was so hot I felt about to burst into flames. "Theodore Decker. Everybody calls me Theo. I live uptown," I added doubtfully.

"Well, I'm James Hobart, but everyone calls me Hobie." His gaze was bleak and disarming. "I live downtown."

At a loss I glanced away, unsure if he was making fun.

"Sorry." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Don't mind me. Welty—" he glanced at the ring in his palm—"was my business partner."

Was? The moon-dial clock—whirring and cogged, chained and weighted, a Captain Nemo contraption—burred loudly in the stillness before gonging on the quarter hour.

"Oh," I said. "I just. I thought—"

"No. I'm sorry. You didn't know?" he added, looking at me closely.

I looked away. I had not realized how much I'd counted on seeing the old man again. Despite what I'd seen—what I knew—somehow I'd still managed to nurture a childish hope that he'd pulled through, miraculously, like a murder victim on TV who after the commercial break turns out to be alive and recovering quietly in the hospital.

"And how do you happen to have this?"

"What?" I said, startled. The clock, I noticed, was way off: ten a.m., ten p.m., nowhere even near the correct time.

"You said he gave it to you?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Yes. I—" The shock of his death felt new, as if I'd failed him a second time and it was happening all over again from a completely different angle.

"He was conscious? He spoke to you?"

"Yes," I began, and then fell silent. I felt miserable. Being in the old man's world, among his things, had brought the sense of him back very strongly: the dreamy underwater mood of the room, its rusty velvets, its richness and quiet.

"I'm glad he wasn't alone," said Hobie. "He would have hated

that." The ring was closed in his fingers and he put his fist to his mouth and looked at me.

"My. You're just a cub, aren't you?" he said.

I smiled uneasily, not sure how I was meant to respond.

"Sorry," he said, in a more businesslike tone that I could tell was meant to reassure me. "It's just—I know it was bad. I saw. His body—" he seemed to grasp for words—"before they call you in, they clean them up as best they can and they tell you that it won't be pleasant, which of course you know but—well. You can't prepare yourself for something like that. We had a set of Mathew Brady photographs come through the shop a few years ago—Civil War stuff, so gruesome we had a hard time selling it."

I said nothing. It was not my habit to contribute to adult conversation apart from a 'yes' or 'no' when pressed, but all the same I was transfixed. My mother's friend Mark, who was a doctor, had been the one who'd gone in to identify her body and no one had had very much to say to me about it.

"I remember a story I read once, a soldier, was it at Shiloh?" He was talking to me but not with his whole attention. "Gettysburg? a soldier so mad with shock that he started burying birds and squirrels on the battlefield. You had a lot of little things killed too, in the crossfire, little animals. Many tiny graves."

"24,000 men died at Shiloh in two days," I blurted.

His eyes reverted to me in alarm.

"50,000 at Gettysburg. It was the new weaponry. Minié balls and repeating rifles. That was why the body count was so high. We had trench warfare in America way before World War I. Most people don't know that."

I could see he had no idea what to do with this.

"You're interested in the Civil War?" he said, after a careful pause.

"Er—yes," I said brusquely. "Kind of." I knew a lot about Union field artillery, because I'd written a paper on it so technical and fact-jammed that the teacher had made me write it again, and I also knew about Brady's photographs of the dead at Antietam: I'd seen

the pictures online, pin-eyed boys black with blood at the nose and mouth. "Our class spent six weeks on Lincoln."

"Brady had a photography studio not far from here. Have you ever seen it?"

"No." There had been a trapped thought about to emerge, something essential and unspeakable, released by the mention of those blank-faced soldiers. Now it was all gone but the image: dead boys with limbs akimbo, staring at the sky.

The silence that followed this was excruciating. Neither of us seemed to know how to move forward. At last Hobie recrossed his legs. "I mean to say—I'm sorry. To press you," he said falteringly.

I squirmed. Coming downtown, I'd been so filled with curiosity that I'd failed to anticipate that I might be expected to answer any questions myself.

"I know it must be difficult to talk about. It's just—I never thought—"

My shoes. It was interesting how I'd never really looked at my shoes. The toe scuffs. The frayed laces. *We'll go to Bloomingdale's Saturday and buy you a new pair.* But that had never happened.

"I don't want to put you on the spot. But—he was aware?"

"Yes. Sort of. I mean—" his alert, anxious face made some remote part of me want to burst out with all kinds of stuff he didn't need to know and it wasn't right to tell him, splattered insides, ugly repetitive flashes that broke in on my thoughts even while I was awake.

Murky portraits, china spaniels on the mantelpiece, golden pendulum swinging, tockety-tock, tockety-tock.

"I heard him calling." Rubbing my eye. "When I woke up." It was like trying to explain a dream. You couldn't. "And I went over to him and I was with him and—it wasn't that bad. Or, not like you'd think," I added, since this had come out sounding like the lie it was.

"He spoke to you?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded. Dark mahogany; potted palms.

"He was conscious?"

Again I nodded. Bad taste in my mouth. It wasn't something you could summarize, stuff that didn't make sense and didn't have a story, the dust, the alarms, how he'd held my hand, a whole lifetime there just the two of us, mixed-up sentences and names of towns and people I hadn't heard of. Broken wires sparking.

His eyes were still on me. My throat was dry and I felt a bit sick. The moment wasn't moving on to the next moment like it was supposed to and I kept waiting for him to ask more questions, anything, but he didn't.

At last he shook his head as if to clear it. "This is—" He seemed as confused as I was; the robe, the gray hair loose gave him the look of a crownless king in a costume play for children.

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head again. "This is all so new."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you see, it's just—" he leaned forward and blinked, quick and agitated—"It's all very different from what I was told, you see. They said he died instantly. Very, very emphatic on that point."

"But—" I stared, astonished. Did he think I was making it up?

"No, no," he said hastily, putting a hand up to reassure me. "It's just—I'm sure it's what they say to everyone. 'Died instantly'?" he said bleakly, when still I stared at him. "'Perfectly painless'? 'Never knew what hit him'?"

Then—all at once—I did see, the implications slithering in on me with a chill. My mother too had "died instantly." Her death had been "perfectly painless." The social workers had harped on it so insistently that I'd never thought to wonder how they could be quite so sure.

"Although, I do have to say, it was difficult to imagine him going that way," Hobie said, in the abrupt silence that had fallen. "The flash of lightning. Falling over unawares. Had a sense, you do sometimes, that it wasn't like they said, you know?"

"Sorry?" I said, glancing up, disoriented by the vicious new possibility I'd stumbled into.

"A goodbye at the gate," said Hobie. He seemed to be talking partly to himself. "That's what he would have wanted. The parting glimpse, the death haiku—he wouldn't have liked to leave without stopping to speak to someone along the way. 'A teahouse amid the cherry blossoms, on the way to death.'"

He had lost me. In the shadowy room, a single blade of sun pierced between the curtains and struck across the room, where it caught and blazed up in a tray of cut glass decanters, casting prisms that flickered and shifted this way and that and wavered high on the walls like paramecia under a microscope. Though there was a strong smell of wood smoke, the fireplace was burnt-out and black looking and the grate choked with ashes, as if the fires hadn't been lit in a while.

"The girl," I said timidly.

His glance came back to me.

"There was a girl too."

For a moment, he did not seem to understand. Then he sat back in his chair and blinked rapidly as if water had been flicked in his face.

"What?" I said—startled. "Where is she? She's okay?"

"No—" rubbing the bridge of his nose—"no."

"But she's alive?" I could hardly believe it.

He raised his eyebrows in a way that I understood to mean yes. "She was lucky." But his voice, and his manner, seemed to say the opposite.

"Is she here?"

"Well—"

"Where is she? Can I see her?"

He sighed, with something that looked like exasperation. "She's meant to be quiet and not have visitors," he said, rummaging in his pockets. "She's not herself—it's hard to know how she'll react."

"But she's going to be all right?"

"Well, let us hope so. But she's not out of the woods yet. To employ the highly unclear phrase the doctors insist on using." He'd taken cigarettes from the pocket of his bathrobe. With uncertain