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**The
Artist**

LUCY STEEDS

JOHN MURRAY

London, 1957

A woman. A painting. The sense of greeting an old friend.

The woman has travelled a long way to stand here, in a cavernous room of the National Gallery. Crowds ebb like shoals of fish around her, heels flitting against the polished wooden floor, but the woman does not move. She stands straight and still, a folded raincoat over one arm.

She does not take her eyes from the painting.

It is a large canvas, wide and tall with an ornate golden frame. The colours are vivid. The paint is thick like glue. She could reach out a hand and run her fingertip over the cragged surface if she wanted, but she does not.

Her eyes shift to a plaque affixed to the wall.

Edouard Tartuffe, 1859–1921

Le Festin (The Feast), 1920

Oil on canvas

The Feast depicts a table laden with food, some half-eaten, some rotting, but nobody present. The colours are characteristic of Tartuffe's bright, luminous palette, and the painting showcases the distinctive brushwork which earned him the name 'Master of Light'. Particular skill is shown in the reflections in the wine glasses and the smear of butter on a silver knife. The table is laid for thirteen which has led some to suggest it is an allegory of the Last Supper. The uneaten feast can be seen to represent the futility of decadence after the First World War, as well as lives interrupted and pleasure wasted. *The Feast* is the only painting to survive the fire that destroyed Tartuffe's studio in 1920.

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A smile flickers across the woman's face. She remembers the fire. She remembers the stacks of paintings buckling among dancing amber flames. She remembers the acrid smell of smoke and melting varnish. A wall of heat. Paint evaporating into fumes.

She remembers this painting, too. She remembers *The Feast* cracking down the middle, fire lapping at its edges. She remembers orange tongues eating at the canvas until wine glasses and melon halves and slices of ham were reduced to nothing but dry black curlicues on the studio floor. She remembers the fire swallowing the feast whole.

And most of all, she remembers setting the blaze.

Part I

The Painter

Saint-Auguste-de-Provence, 1920

JOSEPH

A stranger comes to town. He walks along a dusty road, fields of lavender on one side, a placid green river on the other. The sun beats down on his bare head and he carries only a battered knapsack over one shoulder. He is young, barely twenty, and walks tall and straight like a ballet dancer, or a soldier who has never seen war. The town is a sleepy hamlet in the south of France. The stranger is Joseph Adelaide.

He clutches a letter in his hand. He has read it over and over but it contains only one word:

Venez.

Come.

Beneath that is a signature. The letter is from somebody Joseph has never met but he knows the signature intimately. It is a signature most often found in the corner of paintings. It is scrawled in the corner of Joseph's favourite painting in the National Gallery, *Bathers at Arles*. It appears on paintings in gilded frames at Sotheby's and the Knoedler. And it is at the bottom of a letter addressed to him.

Joseph had been apprehensive about sending his request at first. He had reworked and rewritten it, crossing out his puny phrases and feeble wording. He had gone through draft after draft until one day, after months of agonising, his sister had snatched the letter from his hand and taken it to the post office herself.

There had followed months of silence. Joseph put the letter out of his mind; he had been foolish to think he would get a response. Arrogant, even. He buried his head in his hands whenever he thought of it.

But then . . . this. In early June a single sheet of paper had arrived.

He had not needed the return address to know who the letter was from. He had not needed the cluster of foreign stamps or the blue ink of the French postal service. The signature had told him everything. He had packed his bags that very morning, sent a telegram to his editor to let him know that yes, it was happening, yes, he had received a reply, and yes, he was going. He did not know when he would be back.

Joseph had caught a crowded train to Charing Cross, then another to Dover and talked his way onto a steamer bound for Calais. A further train had taken him to Paris where he had spent an uncomfortable night in a rickety boarding house before catching the morning train to Avignon. It was late when he arrived, too late to go on, and so he took a room in the hostel by the station. The next morning he wandered the pale stone streets, knapsack over his shoulder. There were no trains to where he needed to go next. No public transportation at all. He eventually managed to flag down a trundling milk cart and hitch a ride to Saint-Auguste, where he has just been deposited on the side of the road.

He is dusty. He is sweaty, and nearly blinded by the hot, white light of the Mediterranean sun.

A crinkled woman in the village tobacconist has given him directions: go down the empty road, keeping the river on your left. Go past the tumbledown church until you come to a donkey track. If you reach the caves you have gone too far. Turn left off the road and follow the donkey track. You will see no one. Keep walking past the ruined buildings, and just when you think you have gone the wrong way you will come to an old farmhouse. Good luck.

Joseph looks about himself now, at the dry, shimmering fields and the trees that rise like columns of smoke. He rubs a lavender stalk between finger and thumb, staining them with its tangy scent. He does not know what he will find at the end of this path. His feet are ungainly in his brother's too-big boots, and he tries to focus on the steady in and out of his breath. He has his letter of

introduction: a telegram from his editor, hastily sent to the Paris boarding house where he had tossed and turned. And most importantly, he has that one scribbled word: *Come*.

He passes what looks like a sheep pen, and beyond that a dilapidated structure that could be a shepherd's hut. Or an ice store? He knows nothing of life in the countryside. He is used to the horizonless vistas of a grey city, not this fresh expanse of clear air and buttery light. He steps beneath the dappled shadows of peeling plane trees, weaves through a twisted olive grove, and then, finally, he sees it: a low, rambling farmhouse. It is made of soft yellow stones turned golden in the afternoon sun. The roof is encased in a lattice of vines. The windows are small to keep out the heat.

Joseph takes a deep breath and steps up to the front door. Its blue paint is flaking and the handle is browned with rust. He knocks.

No answer.

He knocks again, pressing his ear to the door but there is no sound from within. 'Hello?' he calls, his voice dry and crackling, but the only response is the dull hum of crickets, and the steady thump of his heart.

Something twinges in his stomach. He feels glaringly at odds with his surroundings: too pale, too foreign to be here. He takes off his glasses and wipes them on the corner of his shirt. Perhaps this is a sign. The empty road, the deserted house: perhaps it is a warning that he should turn around, hurry back up the lonely path, go home with his tail between his legs.

He has the curious sensation that he is being watched.

Joseph steps back, shielding his eyes and taking in the hazy landscape. Sunlight radiates from the yellow fields and dust sticks to the olive trees, dark and fragrant in their arthritic twists. This is a place he knows well, though he has never been here before. He recognises it from paintings of hay bales and wheat fields, from sketches of green, snaking rivers and purple dusks over distant hills.

He shifts the knapsack onto his shoulder and walks around the edge of the house, stumbling over a fallen roof tile. Loose stones

are scattered about as if the house is dissolving into the ground. Sun-bleached grass grows right up to the walls, but Joseph notices there are footstep-trodden paths winding this way and that. A wheelbarrow lies rusting in the sun, but its belly is full of freshly cut flowers.

Somebody is here.

Joseph rounds the back of the house and comes to a stone terrace which gives way to a long, undulating field. Down at the bottom he can see a copse of trees and what might be a river, slipping darkly through green bushes.

As Joseph steps onto the terrace, his heart stutters in his chest. There is a man in an old wicker chair. He is leaning back with a cigar in one hand, the index finger of the other resting in a jar of honey. Joseph watches as he takes his finger from the honey and sucks it, slowly, before returning it to the jar. He takes a long drag of the cigar.

Here is the man Joseph has travelled days and miles to see. The man who answered his letter with a single command. The Master. Edouard Tartuffe.

Joseph's knapsack falls to the ground with a thunk. Tartuffe looks up. He is about sixty or so. Robust, full-faced and wide about the middle, with a frothy grey beard spreading down his front as if he has spilt it. He has one milky eye. The other is quite sharp, but the one he turns on Joseph now is clouded and ghostly.

He removes his finger from the honey. 'Who', he asks in thick, gravelly French, 'are you?'

Joseph steps forward, fumbling for the telegram of introduction in his knapsack. 'My name is Joseph Adelaide,' he says hastily, pulling out the sheet of paper from his editor. 'I am a journalist. I wrote to you several months ago and you did me the kindness of replying.' Joseph's French is good but it still feels strange to him, like he is wearing another man's clothes. 'You invited me here.' He holds out the telegram. 'You invited me here . . . and now I have come.'

The old man sucks honey from his finger and stares at Joseph with his mismatched eyes. He is wearing a loose smock stained

like a butcher's apron and his fingers are rimed with paint. With a grunt, he holds out a hand for the telegram. Joseph stumbles forward and gives it to him.

Tartuffe squints. Then frowns. 'I cannot read this,' he says gruffly, and tosses the paper to the ground.

Joseph is startled for a moment. Then he realises: the telegram is in English. 'I . . . I'm sorry,' he stammers, the sweat beneath his armpits growing warm and sour. 'It is a letter from my editor, thanking you for welcoming me. For allowing me to come here.' He stoops to pick up the crumpled telegram. 'You see, I have come to write an article about you.'

Tartuffe gives no sign of recognition so Joseph fumbles about himself once more. 'I have come . . . to profile you. Here . . .' He holds out a second piece of paper which Tartuffe takes with a look of distrust. It is the letter in the painter's own hand, bearing only the word: *Come*.

Tartuffe frowns again, his sticky hand trembling as he looks at the letter's front and back. Then up at Joseph. 'I do not know what this is.'

'But . . . you wrote it.'

Suddenly it is as if a blood vessel has burst. As if a dam has broken and the old man's patience can be tested no longer. 'I do not have time to write my own letters!' he barks, waving his cigar in the air. 'I do not know what this is! Sylvette!' he shouts. 'Sylvette!' He is agitated, twisting in his chair and calling over his shoulder. 'Sylvette! I cannot have strange men coming to the house on a Tuesday! I cannot be disturbed when I am working!'

Joseph takes a step back, tripping over his knapsack. He has been warned about this. He has heard the stories. The woman's eyes in the tobacconist had widened when he told her where he was going. She had asked him to repeat the name of the person he sought, as if giving him a chance to provide a different answer. But he had said the name again and her lips had tightened. When she gave him directions it had been with a small, warning shake of her head as if to say: do not disturb the slumbering bear.

'A recluse,' is what Joseph's editor had called Tartuffe. 'Misanthrope' was one word murmured in art circles, as was 'hermit' and even 'tyrant'.

But so was 'genius'. Here was the man who could create beauty from nothing. Here was an artist who had dined with Van Gogh and argued with Cézanne. Who had expanded the boundaries of paint and colour and light itself. And so Joseph was prepared to expose himself to all the slings and arrows, the tirades and the tempests, the bursts of anger and the wild swings of mood. He would face all of it, just for a chance to meet the man sitting in front of him now. The man who had made him see the world anew.

'Sylvette!' Tartuffe bellows again. 'Sylvette!'

And suddenly a young woman is there. She appears at the end of the terrace, wiping her hands on a thin cotton apron.

'My niece,' Tartuffe grumbles by way of introduction, not looking at her. The woman has large brown eyes and her skin is smattered with freckles. Her hair is cropped short in the latest fashion, but here it looks more practical than chic. Tartuffe hands her the letter over his shoulder. 'Explain.'

Sylvette unsticks the paper and inspects it. She has a girlish face but her hands are rough and work-worn. Her brown hair glows like copper in the afternoon sun, and she has a slim cigarette tucked behind one ear.

Joseph itches in the long, hot silence as Sylvette reads the only word on that piece of paper. Then she looks up, and says simply, 'Here is your Young Man with Orange.'

Joseph glances from Sylvette to Tartuffe. Either he has misunderstood or mistranslated, but the old man shows no confusion. Instead he stares at Joseph as if seeing him for the first time. He gets up, wiping his honeyed finger on his trousers and walks around him. Appraising him. He tucks a thumb under Joseph's chin and turns his head this way and that.

'Ettie, fetch me an orange,' he says without taking his eyes from Joseph's face. Sylvette disappears into the house and returns a moment later clutching a small waxy orange.

Tartuffe holds it up to Joseph's cheek, as if to see how the colour works against the pale English face. 'Yes,' he murmurs. 'Yes.'

He puts the orange into Joseph's palm and takes a step back to see the effect: the weary, dust-shrouded traveller and the bright burst of fruit. Then he inches forward and, gently, with both hands, slides the glasses from Joseph's face. He looks at him for a long moment, then slides them back. 'All right.' He wipes his hands on the corner of his smock. 'All right. Listen to me very carefully,' he says as he sits back down. 'I have no interest in your work, Monsieur Adelaide. I do not wish to be the subject of any article or feature. I do not give interviews. I do not care what you are writing . . . But I am in need of a model.'

The hum of crickets dies down. The twitch of a breeze that was troubling the terrace wraps itself up into nothing. 'A model?' Joseph asks, and his voice is a croak.

'Can you sit very still?' Tartuffe presses. 'Can you be absolutely silent? Can you promise not to interrupt me, not to touch anything, not distract me? Can you live as a shadow except when I need you to be the Young Man with Orange?'

Joseph's mouth is dry as parchment. A tightness comes over his body. This is not how the scene was meant to go. He has promised his editor an interview. He has gathered all the money he owns, he has slammed the door in his father's face. He has travelled for days through dust and smog and heat. He came here to write an article that no one has written before. 'I . . . I'm not a model,' he says. 'I am here to write about you. To—'

'If you will not sit for me then you can turn around and leave right now,' Tartuffe says briskly, taking a drag of his cigar. 'But if you sit for me and let me paint you . . . then you may stay. Write whatever you want. I do not care. I will not read it. I just need you to be silent and still. Can you do that?'

Joseph watches the cigar tip glow and then dim. Two halves of himself strain in opposite directions. He is no model, no muse. He is too self-conscious for that. But then again . . . he is here. He is standing before the greatest painter of the age, closer than anyone has come in many years.

Joseph feels the balance of the scales hanging on his answer. On one side is the admission that *no, this was a mistake*. A quick shuffle home and an apology to his father, a note to his editor explaining his error. Another thing at which he has failed. But on the other side of the scales . . . a hazy, golden opportunity. The chance to stare into those marble eyes and unlock the man behind them. To work his way into the mind of this fabled, mysterious painter.

Joseph meets Tartuffe's gaze. He squares his shoulders, and with a voice that comes from somewhere deep in his chest he says, 'Yes. I can do that.'

'Good,' Tartuffe claps his hands together, a grin emerging within his beard. 'You may stay until I complete the painting. When I am finished, you leave.'

'Yes,' Joseph nods, 'yes, all right, thank you.' But Tartuffe waves his hand. He is already turning to his niece again. 'Ettie,' he says, 'find the boy somewhere to sleep.'

The deal is struck. The stage is set.

Up a winding staircase, across a dimly lit landing, under a low-slung beam and over to a solitary door. Ettie heaves it open with a shove of her shoulder and stands back to let Joseph enter. The room is small. It squats beneath the eaves of the house where the heat of the day has collected.

Joseph puts his knapsack down carefully. Letting his eyes adjust to the dimness, he sees that the room is filled not with furniture, but with props. A cluster of china vases occupies one corner. There is a butterfly net, a broken drum, a rusting pitchfork. Metal teapots, coils of rope, an old birdcage. There is a dried-out bouquet of flowers, now brittle and faded, the ghost of a still-life arrangement. Empty picture frames are stacked along one wall and a roll of canvas has been kicked against another. The room is suffused with an air of neglect; it is where every unwanted object has been ushered.

Joseph steps forward. He has left his boots in the hall and the floor is grainy under his bare feet. The wooden boards are furred

with dust. There is one small window in the corner, round like a porthole, and he crosses over to it, stooping to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling. Through the glass he can see the rolling field at the back of the house, and in the distance the glint of the river, black and glossy in the evening light. He tries to open the window but the handle has been painted over. It is sealed shut.

Joseph turns and tries to smile at Ettie. She is standing in the corner, hands behind her back, watching him closely. 'This is very kind of you,' he says. 'Thank you.'

She does not reply.

An iron-framed bed has been pushed against one wall. The mattress looks lumpy and the bedding must once have been white but is now a stale yellow. This is not the house of a man who welcomes guests. The only other furniture in the room is a desk hidden under a pile of plates, and beside it a large oval mirror. 'This . . . this is the mirror from *Empty Room*,' Joseph exclaims. 'It is the mirror from the painting, I recognise it!'

Ettie looks at him blankly.

Joseph crosses the room excitedly and runs a hand along the mirror's wooden frame. He had first seen a copy of *Empty Room* in a page of the *Burlington Magazine*. It was a dodgy halftone reproduction but even in scratchy black and white the painting had transfixed him. *Empty Room* shows a shadowy bedroom: the vague corner of a mattress, rumpled sheets, an oval mirror. It is this mirror which reveals the rest of the room: an unmade bed. A gold wedding band on a dressing table. An open window, curtains gently blowing towards a field of poppies.

Joseph had rushed to see the painting at the Royal Academy where it had hung in pride of place at last year's Summer Exhibition. He had marvelled at its size and its scale, at the liveliness of the brushwork and the blood-red spray of the poppies. He had brought his nose close to the canvas. He had stood far away. He had come upon the painting sideways, trying to trick his brain into seeing it again for the first time. He had stood with his mouth agape, taking in the light, the texture and the way the reflected world seemed brighter than the real one.