

It was as if Irene had always been with us, as if she was blood, even as she called my father Sir. (But this was charming, a nickname she'd invented, an endearment). There was only one uneasiness: Irene had a strange, stiff manner around the reproductions. She stood before a painting with her hands clasped behind her back. Somber, as though she was peering into the open casket of a stranger. After a few moments, she eulogized it with some vague banality ("It's beautiful" or "It's not my cup of tea. But I see why it's so famous"). She might shrug "I don't know. I don't know much about art."

If I drew close to point out a painter's signature, obscured in lemon tree's limbs or engraved along the silver frame of a mirror, she winced. "Just step back a hair. It makes me nervous." I retreated further from the paintings, my old companions. Now I only spoke to Irene about them. (A kind of betrayal. Whispering behind a person's back when they are within earshot). I divulged: the bride doesn't smile because she wants to hide her dead black tooth. That merchant's pinkie ring is not a real Spanish emerald, it is imposter tourmaline, green glass. And this is not Rubens' brushwork; it is the trademark of his favorite underling, an anonymous apprentice.

Of all the reproductions in the house, Irene favored a van Eyck. The "Virgin and Child Reading." She said she'd never seen the child painted so beautifully. In most religious art, she explained, the infant stands upright on his mother's lap, clutching a king's scepter instead of a rattle in his boneless fist. Unrealistic. A child cannot stand on his own until he is one. Or even more uncanny, his face is painted as a toothless old man's. The impression of a shrunken head. She always wondered why painters refused to make the Child child-like.

Because she was so taken with this painting, I wrote a very short story of the lives of the Virgin and the Child and gave it to Irene as a present. When she read it, Irene wiped her wet eyes with the back of her hand, and I remember very vividly the thin skin of her hand stained faint blue. As if the ink of her irises had run. But this can't possibly be true.

Irene kept the story so I cannot copy it here. It was not particularly artful, but Irene made much of it. It went, more or less:

Virgin and Child Reading.

The Virgin wore a beautiful dress, but it was her only dress. It was the color of the blue veins in the wrist. Her shawl was like spilling blood. Her child had no father. She read to the baby every day. Her son was like any

baby, he cried when he was hungry and when his teeth were growing. His first word was “ma,” just like everybody’s first word. Only, it was strange that his eyes moved quickly like he was reading the words of the book on her lap. She thought she was imagining things. When he got older, and learned to speak, he mentioned things from the books that she thought he couldn’t possibly remember. He’d heard that story when he was just a few days old. She said to herself, this is just my imagination. One day, she found him with a book on his lap, reading aloud to himself. She hadn’t yet taught him the alphabet. She fainted. She was afraid he must be some kind of demon. He woke her with a kiss and said “Why did you faint?” She said it was unnatural that a child would know how to read without being taught. He said he’d known how to read before he was born, before he learned to speak, and if he could’ve spoken when he was a baby, he would’ve praised her for reading him so many stories because books are sacred. She’d always wondered who his father was, and now she knew it was God.

This last line had given me trouble. Sometimes God was capitalized in books, sometimes not. Irene confirmed that I’d been correct to capitalize my G.

Irene showed the story to my mother and father. She asked permission to add a sixth subject to my schoolwork: composition. Each week she chose a painting, and I would write a page-long story about a figure in the painting. I took the exercise very seriously. Long after Irene was expelled from our house for unpardonable crimes, I continued drafting compositions. I never submitted them for butchering by my father’s correcting pen. They were read by no one. I hid the stories between the pages of a book no one would thumb through. Its spine had never been broken, its title uninviting. “Discourse on the Method.” Descartes’ infinitesimal calculus.

As I wrote, I imagined Irene, my reader.

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Of his one hundred and one reproductions, the “Virgin and Child Reading” is considered the Master’s strangest choice. For centuries, the painting was attributed to Jan van Eyck. The father of oil painting. A restoration of the painting was undertaken in 1957. The restoration artists, in the course of their work, grew doubtful it was an authentic van Eyck. An irregular lettering in the inscription deviated from the artist’s handwriting. The virgin’s robe was built with lead-white and a red glaze (paints never found in van Eyck’s workshop). And then, there was the

matter of the unusual shadow in a fold of cloth. A letter, a color, a shadow. The painting was renamed a forgery, or a devious imitation.

Among restoration artists, the allegation was disputed with venom. Even the Master's father published his opinion on the findings. He concurred: it could not possibly be van Eyck's hand. The painting was re-catalogued "Virgin and Child Reading," Anon.

Curiously, no one called it a masterpiece anymore.

If his task was to reproduce the greatest masterpieces of the finest masters, it is peculiar that the Master would toil over the "Virgin and Child Reading." A minor piece. An insignificant artist. An unknown.