

I must describe the house where I spent eighteen years of captivity, before the first strangers ever to cross the threshold arrive (the starched policemen, one sweet, one stalwart).

The house belongs, in deed, to Gertrude. Following the success of my father's exhibition of reproductions, she offered him (perhaps in an extravagant gesture of friendship, or a calculated checkmate of patronage) her inherited country estate as a sanctuary to work undisturbed.

During a long-ago depression, Gertrude's father purchased the property for its isolation. The nearest skin-and-bones town ten miles away. He erected an impenetrable black-iron gate ornately wrought with pirouetting does and gnashing bears and thickets of thorn capable of pricking a trespasser. Gertrude's father had been a prolific collector of art, strictly for sake of investment. Masterpieces, he reasoned, are undiminished by the trivial swells or sicknesses of economies. However, a rash of art thefts by desperate gentlemen, dethroned by their own imprudent investments, made him eager to transport his treasures to a more secure shelter. He architected the estate for safekeeping.

I've illustrated it like a damp impregnable vault, severe as a monk's cell. This wasn't my intention. It is built of brilliant stone that warms in the sun like bread and bleaches moon-shine-white at night. Many of the walls are glass, though the windowpanes are as solid as diamonds. The ceilings high enough to house flocks of birds. On the ground floor: a kitchen, a library, a small frilly parlor where Gertrude's stepmother entertained socialite ladies-in-waiting. A formal dining room with a king's table surrounded by twenty-five perpetually empty seats of our solitude. The ballroom, which once hosted fifty fox-trotting couples, became my father's enormous studio. On the second floor: my bedroom, the master bedroom, and several guest suites reserved for guests that would never be invited. As for the cellar, it remained locked for almost eighteen years. My father wore the key at his belt.

Last, the walls of the house were adorned with twenty-five of the Master's reproductions. Gertrude had advised my father to keep them off the market so buyers would grow greedier hungrier over time. To withhold until the appetite for the priceless inspired wolfish delirium. So, in keeping with her father's legacy, the paintings came to be guarded by the house.

I can count on one hand the number of people granted entry into the house in eighteen years. The two policemen, once the iron gate admitted them, broke the enchantment of seclusion. Multitudes would follow in termite- fashion. I have not returned since.

But I've cheated chronology, in the collapsing condensed way a dream unfolds, instead of the logic of linear storytelling. Forgive this bad habit of mine. Since I was a child, I've always been unable to resist this curiosity: I always read the final sentence of a book first.