

A story is meant to be written on a typewriter with a glass of whiskey standing at the ready. Preferably in a garret in Paris, and, if at all possible, with the Eiffel Tower in view from the window.

“Working again?” said John.

Eliot grunted.

“How is it coming? It seems like you’re running yourself ragged.”

Eliot looked up. “Don’t you have studying to do?”

“Done,” said John. “Meeting up with Francesca tonight. You should come, she has a friend.”

A story, like all literature, is supposed to be a way to escape reality. The engineers at their whiteboards, with their Venn diagrams, will say that there are always boundary conditions; always limits. And so, too, with literature. The play must end, the theatregoers must all go home; and perhaps they did not feel the sense of catharsis completely. Surely they were not completely taken up by the play—they had other thoughts on their mind.

And yet, Eliot kept writing. Why? He was a tireless romantic, that much was certain. He believed that the thoughts he sometimes had, if transcribed into words, if given form, would be worth something. He imagined a neat sheaf of paper, a manuscript, that would outlast him, sitting on a table once he is dead. For this, he has declined John’s invitation to come out tonight. For this, he will stay in and listen to the sound of the rain pattering outside the window instead of sloshing through it as it glistens on the streets of Paris, making women cower under umbrellas while men bravely stride into its assault. It was for this that he had given up his course of study as a lawyer halfway through the third term.

Perhaps a woman had left him; perhaps he dreamed of a crystalline vault where they would meet again.

But every writer needs a break; every writer runs out of cigarettes and must return to reality. And so Eliot stretched his fingers and stepped out into the rain. It was cold—the rain pattering on the glass had been more pleasant than its cold assaults on his head. Eliot looked up at the stars, and thought about the great expanse of space, where there might be many things unimagined (and things also on the streets of Paris, and things also in himself).

He walked down the street to the Café Charbon. When he walked in, he felt like a person from another planet. He knew he had been spending too much time writing. He sat down at the bar and ordered a whiskey. The woman sitting next to him took interest in him, perhaps motivated by some charitable impulse, and turned to address him.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi.”

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I am a writer,” said Eliot.

She turned away; he seemed to have lost her interest.

“Well, I will have to find something else to do,” said Eliot.

He felt himself filled with a ravenous hunger for a woman. Suddenly his manuscript was not of the remotest importance to him. He worried that critics would accuse him of a barrenness of the imagination. He walked down the well-traveled back streets to the dim red light of a whorehouse. He recalled that this was what most of his stories were about, and reflected that perhaps his major themes would come into play in the story of that night.

"Hello," said the gorgeous woman, wearing lace undergarments.

But more important was the old man sitting in the shadows somewhat, out of the way of the lights. Eliot caught his eye and he looked away.

"Would you like to come back with me?" said the woman.

Eliot decided that he would like to (he still had money left over from his parents' allowance back in Minnesota, although this was the last of it), and he followed her into the back, which was also pink and lacy.

When he came out (an indeterminate amount of time later), the night was cold but the rain had stopped. The old man was sitting on the step outside, and Eliot offered him a cigarette.

"You shouldn't do that, you know," said the old man. "With those women. It's not a good thing to do."

Eliot scoffed, though this was his first time and a universe of guilt was sucking away at him.

"Then why are you here?" he said, when words once again filled up the vacuum.

"To protect someone," said the man—not without uncertainty, and yet with resolve.

"Is that so? And who might that be?"

At this point it might be noted that, overwhelmed by a postcoital sadness, Eliot might have started to feel that his writing was a hollow pursuit; that he might find a career that was simultaneously easier and more practical; that if he continued on the path he was on, he would instead gravitate towards the career of literary critic, and become gradually filled with cynicism, like the hero of Wolff's "Bullet to the Brain."

"Her name is Ines," replied the man. "And I am in love with her."

The man did, indeed, have a certain air of stuffy dignity about him. Like a shamed aristocrat still clinging to his airs, not to exert any superiority, but because they are a part of himself.

When Ines emerged from the brothel into the street, it became clear to Eliot that she was hideous. She had large, staring eyes, and a brown mole on her lip; her body overflowed her garters. But the old gentleman, watching her, had an expression as if the most sublime happiness had come over him—an expression like that which Eliot had seen on the face of his father, once, although he could not remember the occasion. All his pretensions were gone—he looked like a child.

"Ines," said the old man. "Shall we go for a walk?"

Eliot, looking up at the stars, reflected that perhaps transcendence could be achieved without literature—through the rain, perhaps, or even through something seemingly ugly. In a streak of mad romanticism he decided to follow this man.

The rain still dripped on the streets with a soft patter, a patter that reminded Eliot of something long ago, of a merry-go-round and a strange sweet he had eaten that he could no longer remember. He stepped gingerly between the lights of the puddles, being careful to stay in the shadows; hoping to someday be forgiven for his youthful foibles.

He saw, in the cone of a streetlight, the old man kiss Ines, and it was like two children kissing with only vague ideas of love—marriage as a home where the man worked and the woman cooked; playing with toys naked together in one of their bedrooms.

The pair cut sideways into a boardinghouse. Bernard ducked under a tree branch. This must have been an often-used side route.

Eliot was suddenly filled with indecision. Why was he a writer, anyway? Surely, in this age of instant communication, literature was soon to become obsolete or untenable. It was certain that Bernard had had a career, and he had fallen into disgrace. Certainly the same thing could happen to him—after promising reviews of an early effort, he would set off on a bold project, but hubris would overcome him; he would write some self-indulgent, academic epic poem, and be written off as a hack, or worse, a neoclassicist, a minor member of some scene, doomed to obscurity. Intolerable. Why would he choose to go down such a path?

He gazed at the sky; he pleaded with the stars. He remembered that he was in Paris—a good enough place for doomed romantics to be—and if he was doomed, then following an eccentric old man accompanied by a prostitute into a dark boardinghouse seemed like an eminently reasonable thing to do.

He walked inside. There was an unidentifiable smell. The darkness was thick, and reminded him again of that day on the merry-go-round, under the bitter autumn sun; not the thickness of the air but the strangeness of it; but a noise pulled him out of his recollection. It was a whisper. He tried to make out the words. He couldn't. He was sure that it was Bernard whispering something to Ines. He was certain that whatever words they might be held a secret that could bring him out of the torpor that had descended over him. He could press his ear to the keyhole and find out.

But he couldn't intrude on something so private, something that he was so certain to be beautiful. He left the boardinghouse, making sure to close the door softly behind him, that the latch didn't sound too loudly when it snapped into place.

The rain had stopped, but the darkness outside was the opposite of the darkness that he had just left: it was open, and it contained infinite possibility rather than a single reality (or two possible realities—one that Eliot had not thought of.) He continued along the Rue de l'Université.

He passed a building with a church-like façade, yet when he peeked in the door he saw shabby carpets and fluorescent lights. Two grumbling university students emerged, sidestepping around him. (Eliot checked his watch—it was 12:30.) From their conversation, he made out that they had just finished a large assignment, that it had taken far longer than they had expected, and that they were late to meet up with friends.

Feeling again a stirring of the body, Eliot followed the two students, hoping that he might be able to satisfy his earlier desire in a more moralistic way. They were going to a university bar. Walking along behind the two students, Eliot imagined an outrage of scrubbed faces and perfume and intelligence, a teeming mass of young students; surely someone would want to fuck him.

Instead, the room that he entered behind the two students was quiet, and dim as if lit by candles. Two students that looked like copies of the originals (long hair and sullen, pale faces) looked up from

a table by the wall and nodded as the two came in. Eliot bought a beer and sat at a booth nearby to them, the better to listen to their conversation.

“Proulx!” exclaimed one. “He is like a dictator! And his assignments, they are like a prison!”

“Martin, be careful,” said the lank, dark haired one. “The bartender here is Proulx’s great friend. And if you don’t do the assignments, how are you going to learn the material?”

“Pah!” said the first. “All that Proulx has to teach me I could learn in an afternoon with any physics textbook and perhaps *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Everybody knows how he spends his nights. I can tell you where he is now—in that dingy boardinghouse on the Rue Martenot. That’s why he was in such a hurry to leave the review session tonight!”

“I don’t believe it. I think he’s a good man. And besides, it isn’t only about passing the exam. We’re learning ideas—a way of looking at the universe.”

The first student smirked unpleasantly.

“The window through which I will view the universe is in the boardroom of Garrigue Electric, once I make my way through Proulx’s hell—and take over my father’s company.”

“Well, maybe that isn’t an option for all of us.”

The rich son stood up. “What did you say?” he said.

Eliot then became absorbed in literary thoughts of how to describe what happened next. Was he “afame?” Was the look he gave to the usurper a glare, or did it qualify as a “blast of hatred?” Was the boy who remained sitting a coward, a pacifist? Were the hands that gripped him justified? Did the smaller boy tumble through the air, somersault? Was the pooling blood on the sidewalk crimson, or black (how it looked in the dark), or roselike in its violent beauty? Its signification of the shortness of life in spite of any system, scientific or literary?

In any case, the assaulting student bolted with a lackey, and the fourth student held the bloody one in his arms. The bartender stood sadly in the doorway. Eliot stood behind him.

The uninjured boy looked up.

“Will you go to the hospital with him?” he said. “Please. I think he’s really hurt. I need to go and find those sons of bitches.”

Eliot considered it. It was suddenly occurring to him that it might be a good idea to get back to his writing. He could find a woman another night. And he had never seen a fight before—he ought to write it down while it was still fresh in his mind. Furthermore, he had no tie to these students.

But if he left, then the two would be left to go to the hospital together; and the one would console the injured, but the injured student would inevitably take it to mean that he was weak, in spite of any reassurances (and perhaps some part of the reassurer believed this, too—because of his defense of the old professor, some lingering scent of perversion clung to him too). And though the wealthy son would feel guilty, and perhaps even apologize in some way, he would always remember that he had

succeeded in what he had done; even sitting in the boardroom of his father's firm passed on to him, he would remember it, though not in words.

"Hell, I'll go with you to the hospital," Eliot said.

And so it was outside a Paris emergency room that Eliot's night ended. The injured boy's wound was sewn up; the rain had started up again with a nervous patter; the stars smiled ambiguously like the Mona Lisa, and the night touched him with a warm gentle breeze, as if urging him home.

"Goodbye!" said the uninjured student. "Remember to write about us! Remember that light moves in paths curved by other stars."

And Eliot, walking down the Rue Sardoux to his apartment, resolved that he would remember. The night was warm; all possibilities collapsed into one.

When he got home, thinking of a poem he was going to write, of blood and science and resolution, he heard John loudly making love to a woman and remembered why he had really left his lonely writing desk beside the window. He didn't think he had the strength to write a single word.

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