Final Dining

Roger Zelazny

I felt the cat’s tongue lick of his brush, lining my cheeks, darkening my beard.

He touched my eyes and they were opened. First the left, then the right. Instantly.

There was no blur of sudden awakening. I stared back into his own dark eyes, intent upon my face. He held the brush delicately as a feather, his thumbnail a spectrum of pigment.

He stood there, admiring me.

“Yes!” he breathed at last. “They are right! Lines of guilt, shame, terror⁠—arrowing those target eyes!

“But they face into the light, nevertheless,” he continued, “⁠—unflinching! ⁠—with all the insolence and pain of Lucifer. They will not drop as he dips the bread...

“Beard needs more red,” he added.

“Not much more,” I said.

He squinted.

“Not much more, though.”

He blew gently upon my face, then covered me.

Portrait sitting in fifteen minutes, he thought. Have to stop.

He was moving around. I felt him light a cigarette.

Mignon is coming at ten.

“Mignon is coming,” I said.

Yes. I will show you to her. She likes to look at paintings, and I’ve never done anything this good before. She doesn’t think I can. I will show her. Of course, she doesn’t know art...

“Yes.”

\* \* \*

I heard a knock on the door. He let her in. I felt his excitement.

“You’re always on time,” he said.

She laughed, with the chime of an expensive clock.

“Always,” she said, “until it’s finished and I can see it. I’m eager.”

She is wearing her portrait smile already, he mused, hanging her coat on the rack. She is sitting in the dark chair now. Dark as her hair. Green tweeds, and a silver pin. Why not diamonds? She’s got them.

“Why not diamonds?” I asked.

“Why not diamonds?”

“Huh? ⁠—Oh, my pin?” She touched it, glancing down at a youthful breast. “You haven’t painted that low yet, have you? I’m posing for a mantelpiece, not a cover story on family fortunes. So, I decided I’d rather have something simple.”

She’s smiling again. Is she mocking me?

“What’s that one you have covered?”

She walked to the canvas.

“Oh,” he said. Delighted. Anticipating. “It’s nothing, really.”

“Let me see it.”

“All right.”

The cloth rustled and I looked up at her.

“Goodness!” she said. “Peter Halsey’s ‘Last Supper’! ⁠—My, but it’s fine.”

She moved farther back, intent.

“He looks as if he’s about to step out of the frame and betray Him all over again.”

“I am,” I said, modestly.

“He probably is,” Peter observed. “He’s rather special.”

“Yes,” she decided. “I’ve never seen those exact colors before. The depth, the texture⁠—he’s very unusual.”

“He ought to be,” he replied. “He came from the stars.”

“The stars?” she puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“His pigment was ground from a meteorite I found this summer. Its redness grabbed my attention right away, and it was small enough to throw in the trunk.”

She studied my brushwork.

“For something this good, you’ve painted it awfully fast.”

“No, it’s been around for some time,” he said. “I was waiting for the right notion of how to do him. That red stone gave me the clue, the same week you began your sittings. Once I got started he practically painted himself.”

“He looks as if he enjoys it all,” she laughed.

“I don’t mind a bit...”

“I doubt that he minds.”

“...for I am that organic changeling, left for a rock fancied as a footstool by the gods.”

“Who knows his origin?”

He covered me, with a matador’s flourish.

“Shall we begin?”

“Yes.”

She returned to the chair.

\* \* \*

After a while, he tried to read her posing eyes.

“Take her. She’s willing.”

He put down the brush, stared at her, at his work, at her.

He picked up the brush again.

“Go ahead. What’s to lose? And think of the gain. That silver could be diamonds on her breast. Think of her breast, think of the diamonds.”

He put the brush down.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m tired, all of a sudden. A cigarette and I’ll be ready to go again.”

She rose, stretching her arms overhead.

“Want me to heat that coffee?”

He looked up, over at his cheap hot plate.

“No, that’s all right. Cigarette?”

“Thanks.”

His hand shook.

She’ll think it’s fatigue.

“Your hand is shaking.”

“Tired, I guess.”

She sat on his studio bed. He seated himself beside her, slowly, half-reclining.

“Hot in here.”

“Yes.”

He took her hand.

“You’re shaking, too.”

“Nerves. D.T.’s. Who knows?”

He raised it to his lips.

“I love you.”

A frightened look widened her eyes, slackened her mouth.

“...and your teeth are lovely.”

He began to embrace her.

“Oh, please...!”

He kissed her, firmly.

“Don’t. If you don’t mean it...”

“I do,” he said. “I do.”

“You’re wonderful,” she sighed, “and your art. I always felt... But⁠—”

He kissed her again, then drew her down beside him.

“Mignon.”

“⁠—”

\* \* \*

Peter Halsey looked out from his balcony, over the landscaped garden with its Augustan walks, the picturesqueness, the eighteenth-century prettiness, and down to the guard rails, the cliffs, and the long, steep slant into the Gulf.

“It is good,” he said, and turned back toward his suite.

“Good,” I repeated.

I hung upon the side wall. He stopped before me.

“What are you smirking at, you old bastard?”

“Nothing.”

Blanche entered from the bedroom, right, patting her wide halo of sunset-pink.

“Did you say something, honey?”

“Yes. But I wasn’t talking to you.”

She looked up at me, pointing with her thumb.

“Him?”

“That’s right. He’s the only good thing I’ve ever done, and we get along well.”

She shuddered.

“He looks something like you, at that⁠—only meaner.”

He turned.

“Do you really think so?”

“Uh-huh. Especially the eyes.”

“Get out of here,” he said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he controlled himself. “But my wife will be back soon.”

“All right, daddy. When will I see you again?”

“I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

A swish of black skirts and she was gone.

Peter did not see her to the door. Not her sort. He studied me a little longer, then crossed the room to the mirror and stared into it.

“Hm,” he announced. “There is a little resemblance⁠—subconscious pun or something.”

“Sure,” I said.

He strolled back toward the balcony, hands in the pockets of his silk dressing gown.

Once more, he looked at the ocean.

“Mater Oceana,” he invoked, “I am happy and unhappy. Take...Take away my unhappiness.”

“What is that?”

He did not answer me, but I knew.

Outside, I heard Mignon coming. The door swung open. I knew.

He stepped back into the room, looking at her.

“My, you’re fresh. Why do you bother with beauty parlors?”

“To stay this way for you, dear. I’d hate to have you lose interest after two months.”

“Small chance of that.”

He embraced her.

I hate you, you rich bitch! You think you can run my life now, because you’re footing the bills. You didn’t make the loot either. It was your old man. ⁠—Go ahead, ask me if I worked today.

She pulled away, reluctantly.

“Do any painting this afternoon, dear?”

No, I was in the bedroom with a blonde.

“No, I had a headache.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is it better now?”

“No, I still have it.” You!

“What about this evening?”

“What about it?”

“What was that French restaurant we passed yesterday?”

“Le Bois.”

“I thought you might like to try it. We’ve eaten in all the others.”

“No, not tonight.”

“Where, then?”

“How about right here?”

She looked troubled.

“I’ll have to call downstairs now, then.”

I’ll bet you can’t even cook. I never have had a chance to find out!

“That’d be fine.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to go out?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Her face brightened.

“They’ll set up a table in the garden, and send the food out on carts⁠—for special guests.”

“Why go to all that bother?”

“Mother said she and Dad had it that way when they honeymooned here. I’ve been meaning to suggest it.”

“Why not?” he shrugged.

\* \* \*

Mignon looked at her watch. She raised her hand, hesitated, then tapped on the bedroom door.

“Aren’t you dressed yet?”

“Just about.”

Why don’t you die and leave me in peace? Maybe then I could paint again. You have no real appreciation of my art⁠—of any art! Or anything else. ⁠—Phoney aesthete! What have you ever worked for? Die! So I can collect...and stop bothering me!

“Why not tonight?” I asked.

“I wonder...?” he mused.

“You are a happy couple⁠—honeymooners. There would be no suspicion. Keep her there until late. Pipe her champagne by the gallon. Dance with her. When the waiters have left, when the lights are dim, when there are just you two, music, the champagne, and darkness⁠—when she begins to laugh too much, when she stumbles as she dances,” I concluded, “then there is the rail.”

There was another tap on the door.

“Ready?”

Peter Halsey adjusted his tie.

“Coming, dear.”

\* \* \*

God! How much of that can she drink? I’ll be under the table first!

“More champagne, darling?”

“Just a little.”

He filled it to the brim.

“Bottle is getting low. Might as well kill it.”

“You haven’t been drinking much,” she accused.

“I wasn’t raised on it.”

The candles were all. The trellises and islands of color now wore impenetrable cloaks. It was deep, inky, outside the wavering halo. The Strauss waltzes whirled and circled from the hidden speaker⁠—but dignified, dim, sotto voce, and excluded from the table. The aromas of invisible blossoms were dying, unmingling themselves, in the refrigerator of night.

He looked at her.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“No! Let’s stay here all night. This is wonderful!”

He squinted at his watch. It was getting late.

A drink, to brace the nerves.

He quaffed the sour fire. Like snowflakes falling upward into a yellow sky, its icy jewels jetted through his head.

“Now is the time.”

He leaned forward and blew out the candles.

“Why did you do that?”

“To be alone with you, in the dark.”

She giggled.

He found her and embraced her.

“Kiss her⁠—that’s it.”

He drew her to her feet, had a hard time unclasping her arms. But he led her, arm about the waist, to the white rail.

“How lovely the ocean, when there is no moon,” she said, thickly. “Didn’t Van Gogh once paint the Seine at ni⁠—”

He struck her behind the knees with his left forearm. She toppled backward, and he tried to catch her. Her head struck a flagstone. He cursed.

“No difference. She’ll be bruised anyhow, when they find her.”

She moaned, softly, as he raised her warm stillness.

He leaned forward, shoving hard, and pushed her over the rail.

He heard her hit stone, once, but the Blue Danube covered all other sounds of descent

“Good night, Mignon.”

“Good night, Mignon.”

\* \* \*

“It was terrible,” he told the detective. “I know I’m drunk and can’t talk straight⁠—that’s why I couldn’t save her. We were having such a good time, dancing and all. She wanted to look at the ocean, then I went back to the table for another drink. I heard her cry out, and, and⁠—”

He covered his face with his hands, forcing a sobbing sound.

“⁠—she was gone!”

He shook all over.

“⁠—and we were having such a good time!”

“Take it easy, Mister Halsey.” The man put a hand on his shoulder. “The desk clerk says he has some pills. Take them and go to bed. Honestly, that’s the best thing you can do now. Your statement wouldn’t be worth much, even though I can see what happened. I’ll make my report in the morning.

“The Coast Guard has a cutter out there now,” he continued. “You’ll have to go to the morgue tomorrow. But just get some sleep now.”

“We were having such a good time,” Peter Halsey repeated, as he staggered to the elevator.

Inside, he lighted a cigarette.

\* \* \*

He unlocked the door and switched on the light.

The suite was transformed.

It was divided into alcoves by the hastily-constructed partitions. Of the original furnishings, only a few chairs and a small table remained.

A placard stood on the table.

Beside the placard was a leather notebook. He opened it, dropping his cigarette to the floor. He read...

He read the names of the critics, the gallery scouts, the museum reviewers, the buyers, the makers of opinion.

It was the invitation list.

A wisp of smoke curled up from the carpet. Unconsciously, he moved his foot to crush it. He was reading the placard.

Peter Halsey Exhibition, it said, Arranged by Mrs. Peter Halsey, on the Anniversary of the Two Most Happy Months in Her Life. 1 AM to 2 PM. Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

\* \* \*

He walked from niche to niche, repainting with his eyes all the works his hands had ever executed.

His watercolors. His stab at cubism. His portraits.

She had hunted them all down, bought or borrowed all of them.

Portrait of Mignon.

He looked at her smile, and her hair, dark as the chair; at her green tweeds; at the silver pin that could have been diamonds.

“⁠—” she said.

Nothing.

She was dead.

And across the way, staring into her smile, with my beard of blood and bread in hand, amidst the dove-bright faces of the holy ones, with my halo also hammered from silver, I smiled back.

“Congratulations. The check will be in the mail promptly.”

Where’s my palette knife?

“Come now! No Dorian Gray business, eh?”

Where’s something that will cut?

“Why this? You painted me as I am. You could as easily have used the pigment for someone else. ⁠—Him, for example, or him. ⁠—But I was your inspiration. I! We drew life from one another, from your despair. Are we not a masterpiece?”

“No!” he cried, covering his face once more. “No!”

“Take those pills and go to bed.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“She wanted me to be great. She tried to buy it for me. But she did want me to be great...”

“Of course. She loved you.”

“I didn’t know. I killed her...”

“Don’t all men? ⁠—Wilde again, you know.”

“Shut up! Stop looking at me!”

“I can’t. I am you.”

“I will destroy you.”

“That would take some doing.”

“You have destroyed me!”

“Ha! Who did the pushing?”

“Go away! Please!”

“And miss my exhibition?”

“Please.”

“Good night, Peter Halsey.”

And I watched him, shadow amidst shadows. He did not stagger. He moved like a machine, like a sleepwalker. Sure. Precise. Certain.

\* \* \*

Ten hours have passed, and the sun is up. Soon now I will hear their footsteps in the hall. The cognoscenti, the great ones: the Berensons, the Duveens...

They will pause outside the door. They will knock, gently.

And after awhile they will try the door.

It will open, and they will come in.

In fact, they are coming now.

They will behold the eyes, tearless windows of a sin-drenched soul...

They have paused outside.

They will see the lines of guilt, shame, terror, and remorse⁠—arrowing those target eyes...

A knock.

⁠—But they face into the light, nevertheless⁠—unflinching! They will not drop!

The doorknob is turning.

“Come in, my lords, come in! Great art awaits you! ⁠—See yourselves a writhen soul⁠—the halo hammered from insurance claims, from pride⁠—see the betrayer betrayed!

“Come! See my masterpiece, my masters, where it hangs against the wall.”

And our teeth forever frozen in mid-gnash.

Notes

Oscar Wilde’s poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” is alluded to in this piece “Yet each man kills the thing he loves...” as is his only novel, the Faustian tale The Picture of Dorian Gray. The novel tells of a beautiful young man named Dorian Gray who posed for a painting by artist Basil Hallward. Realizing that his beauty will fade with time, Dorian wishes that the portrait would age rather than himself, and his wish is fulfilled. His life descends into debauchery, and the portrait displays evidence of each sin as well as all the signs of aging.

Lucifer was originally an archangel until thrown out of Heaven for his pride and insolence. Betray Him all over again indicates that the portrait is of Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve apostles who was the betrayer of Jesus. Mater Oceana means mother ocean; Oceana was sister city to Atlantis but a dystopic society ruled by gluttonous dictators. Sotto voce means to speak under one’s breath or in a hushed, confidential tone. Vincent van Gogh made over 200 paintings of scenes along the Seine river, and some were night scenes. Cognoscenti are people with superior knowledge, understanding and refined taste pertaining to a particular field; in this instance, art collectors, dealers, historians and critics. In the early 1900s, Bernard Berenson was a well known art historian specializing in “Old Masters” and Joseph Duveen, 1st Baron Duveen, was an influential art dealer.