

Cold Fires

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It was so cold that daggered ice hung from the eaves with dangerous points that broke off and speared the snow in the afternoon Sun, only to be formed again the next morning. Snowmobile shops and ski rental stores, filled with brightly polished snowmobiles and helmets and skis and poles and wool knitted caps and mittens with stars stitched on them and down jackets and bright-colored boots stood frozen at the point of expectation when that first great snow fell on Christmas night and everyone thought that all that was needed for a good winter season was a good winter snow, until the cold reality set in and the employees munched popcorn or played cards in the back room because it was so cold that no one even wanted to go shopping, much less ride a snowmobile. Cars didn't start but heaved and ticked and remained solidly immobile, stalagmites of ice holding them firm. Motorists called Triple A and Triple A's phone lines became so crowded they routed the calls to a trucking company in Pennsylvania where a woman with a very stressed voice answered the calls with the curt suggestion that the caller hang up and dial again.

It was so cold dogs barked to go outside, and immediately barked to come back in, and then barked to go back out again; frustrated dog owners leashed their pets and stood shivering in the snow as shivering dogs lifted icy paws, walking in a kind of Irish dance, spinning in that dog circle thing, trying to find the perfect spot to relieve themselves while dancing high paws to keep from freezing to the ground.

It was so cold birds fell from the sky like tossed rocks, frozen except for their tiny eyes which focused on the Sun as if trying to understand its betrayal.

That night the ice hung so heavy from the power lines that they could no longer maintain the electric arc and the whole state went black, followed within the hour by the breakdown of the phone lines. Many people would have a miserable night but the couple had a wood-burning stove. It crackled with flame that bit the dry and brittle birch and consumed the chill air where even in the house they had been wearing coats and scarves that they removed as the hot aura expanded. It was a good night for soup, heated on the cast iron stove and scenting the whole house with rosemary and onion; a good night for wine, the bottle of red they bought on their honeymoon and had been saving for a special occasion, and it was a good night to sit by the stove on the floor, their backs resting against the couch pillows, watching the candles flicker in the waves of heat while the house cracked and heaved beneath its thick iced roof. They decided to tell stories, the sort of stories that only the cold and the fire, the wind and the silent dark combined could make them tell.

"I grew up on an island," she said, "well, you know that. I've already told you about the smell of salt and how it still brings the sea to my breath, how the sound of bathwater can make me weep, how before the birds fell from the sky like thrown rocks, the dark arc of their wings, in certain light, turned white and how certain tones of metal, a chain being dragged by a car, a heavy pan that clangs against its lid become the sound of ships and boats leaving the harbor. I've already told you all that, but I think you should know that my family is descended from pirates, we are not decent people, everything we own has been stolen, even who we are, my hair for instance, these blonde curls can be traced not to any relatives for they are all dark and swarthy but to the young woman my great-great-grandfather brought home to his wife, intended as a sort of help-mate but apparently quite worthless in the kitchen, though she displayed a certain fondness for anything to do with strawberries, you understand the same fruit I embrace for its short season, oh how they taste of summer, and my youth!

"Now that I have told you this, I may as well tell you the rest. This blonde maid of my

great-great-grandfather's house, who could not sew, or cook, or even garden well but who loved strawberries as if they gave her life, became quite adept at rejecting any slightly imperfect fruit. She picked through the bowls that Great-great-Grandmother brought in from the garden and tossed those not perfectly swollen or those with seeds too coarse to the dogs who ate them greedily then panted at her feet and became worthless hunters, so enamored were they with the sweet. Only perfect berries remained in the white bowl and these she ate with such a manner of tongue and lips that Great-great-Grandfather who came upon her like that, once by chance and ever after by intention, sitting in the Sun at the wooden kitchen table, the dogs slathering at her feet, sucking strawberries, ordered all the pirates to steal more of the red fruit which he traded unreasonably for until he became quite the laughingstock and the whole family was in ruin.

"But even this was not enough to bring Great-great-Grandfather to his senses and he did what just was not done in those days and certainly not by a pirate who could take whatever woman he desired" he divorced Great-great-Grandmother and married the strawberry girl who, it is said, came to her wedding in a wreath of strawberry ivy, and carried a bouquet of strawberries from which she plucked, even in the midst of the sacred ceremony, red bulbs of fruit which she ate so greedily that when it came time to offer her assent she could only nod and smile bright red lips the color of sin.

"The strawberry season is short and it is said she grew pale and weak in its waning. Great-great-Grandfather took to the high seas and had many adventures, raiding boats where he passed the gold and coffers of jewels, glanced at the most beautiful woman and glanced away (so that later, after the excitement had passed, these same woman looked into mirrors to see what beauty had been lost) and went instead, quite eagerly, to the kitchen where he raided the fruit. He became known as a bit of a kook.

"In the meantime, the villagers began to suspect that the strawberry girl was a witch. She did not appreciate the gravity of her situation but continued to visit Great-great-Grandmother's house as if the other woman was her own mother and not the woman whose husband she had stolen. It is said that Great-great-Grandmother sicced the dogs on her but they saw the blonde curls and smelled her strawberry scent and licked her fingers and toes and came back to the house with her, tongues hanging out and grinning doggedly at Great-great-Grandmother who, it is said, then turned her back on the girl who was either so naïve or so cunning that she spoke in a rush about her husband's long departures, the lonely house on the hill, the dread of coming winter, a perfect babble of noise and nonsense that was not affected by Great-great-Grandmother's cold back until, the villagers said, the enchantment became perfect and she and Great-great-Grandmother were seen walking the craggy hills to market days as happy as if they were mother and daughter or two old friends and perhaps this is where it would have all ended, a confusion of rumor and memory, were it not for the strange appearance of the rounded bellies of both women and the shocking news that they both carried Great-great-Grandfather's child which some said was a strange coincidence and others said was some kind of trick.

"Great-great-Grandfather's ship did not return when the others did and the other pirate wives did not offer this strawberry one any condolences. He was a famous seaman, and it was generally agreed that he had not drowned, or crashed his ship at the lure of sirens, but had simply abandoned his witchy wife.

"All that winter Great-great-Grandfather's first and second wives grew suspiciously similar bellies, as if size were measured against size to keep an even girth. At long last the strawberry wife took some minor interest in hearth and home and learned to bake bread that Great-great-Grandfather's wife said would be more successfully called crackers, and soup that smelled a bit too ripe but which the dogs seemed to enjoy. During this time Great-great-Grandmother grew curls, and her lips, which had always seemed a mastless ship anchored to the plane of her face, became strawberry shaped. By spring when the two were seen together, stomachs returned to corset size, and carrying between them a bald, blue-eyed

baby, they were often mistaken for sisters. The villagers even became confused about which was the witch and which, the bewitched.

"About this time, in the midst of a hushed ongoing debate amongst the villagers regarding when to best proceed with the witch burning (after the baby, whose lineage was uncertain, had been weaned seemed the general consensus) Great-great-Grandfather returned and brought with him a shipload of strawberries. The heavy scent drove the dogs wild. Great-great-Grandfather drove the villagers mad with strawberries and then, when the absolute height of their passion had been aroused, stopped giving them away and charged gold for them, a plan that was whispered in his ears by the two wives while he held his baby who sucked on strawberries the way other babies sucked on tits.

"In this way, Great-great-Grandfather grew quite rich and built a castle shaped like a ship covered in strawberry vines and with a room at the back, away from the sea, which was made entirely of glass and housed strawberries all year. He lived there with the two wives and the baby daughter and nobody is certain who is whose mother in our family line.

"Of course she did not stay but left one night, too cruel and heartless to even offer an explanation. Great-great-Grandfather shouted her name for hours as if she was simply lost until, at last, he collapsed in the strawberry room, crushing the fruit with his large body and rolling in the juice until he was quite red with it and frightening as a wounded animal. His first wife found him there and steered him to a hot bath. They learned to live together again without the strawberry maid. Strangers who didn't know their story often commented on the love between them. The villagers insisted they were both bewitched, the lit candles in the window to guide her return given as evidence. Of course she never did come back."

Outside in the cold night, even the Moon was frozen. It shed a white light of ice over their pale yard and cast a ghost glow into the living room that haunted her face. He studied her as if she were someone new in his life and not the woman he'd known for seven years. Something about that moonglow combined with the firelight made her look strange, like a statue at a revolt.

She smiled down at him and cocked her head. "I tell you this story," she said, "to explain if ever you should wake and find me gone, it is not an expression of lack of affection for you, but rather, her witchy blood that is to be blamed."

"What became of her?"

"Oh, no one knows. Some say she had a lover, a pirate from a nearby cove, and they left together, sailing the seas for strawberries. Some say she was an enchanted mermaid and returned to the sea. Some say she came to America and was burned at the stake."

"Which do you think is true?"

She leaned back and sighed, closing her eyes. "I think she's still alive," she whispered, "breaking men's hearts, because she is insatiable."

He studied her in repose, a toppled statue while everything burned.

"Now it's your turn," she said, not opening her eyes, and sounding strangely distant. Was that a tear at the corner of her eye? He turned away from her. He cleared his throat.

"All right then. For a while I had a job in Castor, near Rhome, in a small art museum there. I was not the most qualified for the work but apparently I was the most qualified who was willing to live in Castor, population 954, I kid you not. It was a nice little collection, actually. Most of the population of Castor had come through to view the paintings at least once but it was my experience they seemed just as

interested in the carpeting, the light fixtures, and the quantity of fish in the river as they were in the work of the old masters. Certainly the museum never saw the kind of popular attention the baseball field hosted, or the bowling lanes just outside of town.

"What had happened was this. In the 1930s Emile Castor, who had made his fortune on sweet cough drops, had decided to build a fishing lodge. He purchased a beautiful piece of forested property at the edge of what was then a small community, and built his "cabin," a six-bedroom, three-bath house with four stone hearth fireplaces and large windows that overlooked the river in the backyard. Even though Castor had blossomed to a population of nearly a thousand by the time I arrived, deer still came to drink from that river.

"When Emile Castor died in 1989, he stated in his will that the house be converted into a museum to display his private collection. He bequeathed all his estate to the support of this project. Of course, his relatives, a sister, a few old cousins, and several nieces and nephews, contested this for years, but Mr. Castor was a thorough man and the legalities were tight as a rock. What his family couldn't understand, other than, of course, what they believed was the sheer cruelty of his act, was where this love of art had come from. Mr. Castor, who fished and hunted and was known as something of a ladies' man (though he never married), smoked cigars (chased by lemon cough drops), and built his small fortune on his "masculine attitude" as his sister referred to it in an archived letter.

"The kitchen was subdivided. A wall was put up which cut an ugly line right down the middle of what had once been a large picture window that overlooked the river. Whoever made this decision and executed it so poorly was certainly no appreciator of architecture. It was ugly and distorted and an insult to the integrity of the place. What remained of the original room became the employee kitchen: a refrigerator, a stove, a large sink, marble countertops, and a tiled mosaic floor. A small stained glass window by Chagall was set beside the remaining slice of larger window. It remained, in spite of the assault it suffered, a beautiful room, and an elaborate employee kitchen for our small staff.

"The other half of the kitchen was now completely blocked off and inaccessible other than by walking through the employee kitchen. That, combined with the large window which shed too much light to expose any works of art to, had caused this room to develop into a sort of oversized storage room. It was a real mess when I got there.

"The first thing I did was sort through all that junk, unearthing boxes of outdated pamphlets and old stationery, a box of old toilet paper and several boxes of old Castor photographs which I carried to my office to be catalogued and preserved. After a week or so of this I found the paintings, box after box of canvasses painted by an amateur hand, quite bad, almost at the level of a school child, without a child's whimsy, and all of the same woman. I asked Darlene, who acted as bookkeeper, ticket taker, and town gossip what she thought of them.

"That must be Mr. Castor's work," she said.

"I didn't know he painted."

"Well he did, you can see for yourself. Folks said he was nuts about painting out here. Are they all like these?"

"More or less."

"Should have stuck to cough drops," she pronounced. (This from a woman who once confided in me her absolute glee at seeing a famous jigsaw puzzle, glued and framed, hanging in some restaurant in a nearby town.)

"When all was said and done we had fifteen boxes of those paintings and I decided to hang them in the room that was half of what had once been a magnificent kitchen. Few people would see them there, and that seemed right; they really were quite horrid. The sunlight could cause no more damage than their very presence already exuded.

"When they were at last all hung, I counted a thousand, various shapes and sizes of the same dark-haired, gray-eyed lady painted in various styles, the deep velvet colors of Renaissance, the soft pastel hues of Baroque, some frightening bright green reminiscent of Matisse, and strokes that swirled wildly from imitation of van Gogh to the thick direct lines of a grade schooler. I stood in the waning evening light staring at this grotesquerie, this man's art, his poor art, and I must admit I was moved by it. Was his love any less than that of the artist who painted well? Some people have talent. Some don't. Some people have a love that can move them like this. One thousand faces, all imperfectly rendered, but attempted nonetheless. Some of us can only imagine such devotion.

"I had a lot of free time in Castor. I don't like to bowl. I don't care for greasy hamburgers. I have never been interested in stock car racing or farming. Let's just say I didn't really fit in. I spent my evenings cataloguing Emile Castor's photographs. Who doesn't like a mystery? I thought the photographic history of this man's life would yield some clues about the object of his affection. I was quite excited about it actually, until I became quite weary with it. You can't imagine what it's like to look through one man's life like that, family, friends, trips, beautiful women (though none were her). The more I looked at them, the more depressed I grew. It was clear Emile Castor had really lived his life and I, I felt, was wasting mine. Well, I am given to fits of melancholy, as you well know, and such a fit rooted inside me at this point. I could not forgive myself for being so ordinary. Night after night I stood in that room of the worst art ever assembled in one place and knew it was more than I had ever attempted, the ugliness of it all somehow more beautiful than anything I had ever done.

"I decided to take a break. I asked Darlene to come in, even though she usually took weekends off, to oversee our current high school girl, Eileen something or other, who seemed to be working through some kind of teenage hormonal thing because every time I saw her she appeared to have just finished a good cry. She was a good kid, I think, but at the time she depressed the hell out of me. "She can't get over what happened between her and Randy," Darlene told me. "The abortion really shook her up. But don't say anything to her parents. They don't know."

"Darlene, I don't want to know."

"Eventually it was settled. I was getting away from Castor and all things Castor related. I'd booked a room in a B&B in Sundale, on the shore. My duffel bag was packed with two novels, plenty of sunscreen, shorts and swimwear and flip-flops. I would sit in the Sun. Walk along the shore. Swim. Read. Eat. I would not think about Emile Castor or the gray-eyed woman. Maybe I would meet somebody. Somebody real. Hey, anything was possible now that I was getting away from Castor.

"Of course it rained. It started almost as soon as I left town and at times the rain became so heavy that I had to pull over on the side of the road. When I finally got to the small town on the shore I was pretty wiped out. I drove in circles looking for the ironically named "Sunshine Bed and Breakfast" until in frustration at the eccentricity of small towns, I decided that the pleasant-looking house with the simple sign "B&B" must be it. I sat in the car for a moment hoping the rain would give me a break, and craned my neck at the distant looming steeple of a small chapel on the cliff above the roiling waters.

"It was clear the rain would continue its steady torrent, so I grabbed my duffel bag and slopped through the puddles in a sort of half trot, and entered a pleasant foyer of classical music, overstuffed chairs, a wide-eyed calico asleep in a basket on a table and a large painting of, you probably already guessed, Emile Castor's gray-eyed beauty. Only in this rendition she really was. Beautiful. This artist had captured

what Emile had not. It wasn't just a portrait, a photograph with paint if you will, no, this painting went beyond its subject's beauty into the realm of what is beautiful in art. I heard footsteps, deep breathing, a cough. I turned with reluctance and beheld the oldest man I'd ever seen. He was a lace of wrinkles and skin that sagged from his bones like an ill-fitting suit. He leaned on a walking stick and appraised me with gray eyes almost lost in the fold of wrinkles.

"A beautiful piece of work," I said.

"He nodded.

"I introduced myself and after a few confused minutes discovered that I was neither in Sundale nor at the Sunshine B&B. But I could not have been more pleased on any sunny day, in any location, than I was there, especially when I found out I could stay the night. When I asked about the painting and its subject, Ed, as he told me to call him, invited me to join him in the parlor for tea after I had "settled in."

"My room was pleasant, cozy and clean without the creepy assortment of teddy bears too often assembled in B&Bs. From the window I had a view of the roiling sea, gray waves, the mournful swoop of seagulls and the cliff with the white chapel, its tall steeple tipped, not with a cross, but a ship, its great sails unfurled.

"When I found him in the parlor, Ed had a tray of tea and cookies set out on a low table before the fireplace which was nicely ablaze. The room was pleasant and inviting. The cold rain pounded the windows but inside it was warm and dry, the faint scent of lavender in the air.

"Come, come join us," Ed waved his hand, as arthritic as any I've ever seen, gnarled to almost a paw. I sat in the green wing chair across from him. An overstuffed rocking chair made a triangle of our seating arrangement but it was empty; not even the cat sat there.

"Theresa!" he shouted, and he shouted again in a loud voice that reminded me of the young Marlon Brando calling for Stella.

"It occurred to me he might not be completely sane. But at the same moment I thought this I heard a woman's voice and the sound of footsteps approaching from the other end of the house. I confess that for a moment I entertained the notion that it would be the gray-eyed woman, as if I had fallen into a Brigadoon of sorts, a magical place time could not reach, all time-ravaged evidence on Ed's face to the contrary.

"Just then that old face temporarily lost its wrinkled look and took on a divine expression. I followed the course of his gaze and saw the oldest woman in the world entering the room. I rose from my seat.

"Theresa," Ed said, "Mr. Delano of Castor."

"I strode across the room and offered my hand. She slid into it a small soft glove of a hand and smiled at me with green eyes. She walked smoothly and with grace but her steps were excruciatingly small and slow. To walk beside her was a lesson in patience, as we traversed the distance to Ed who had taken to pouring the tea with hands that quivered so badly the china sounded like wind chimes. How had these two survived so long? In the distance, a cuckoo sang and I almost expected I would hear it again before we reached our destination.

"Goodness," she said, when I finally stood beside the rocking chair, "I've never known a young man to walk so slowly." She sat in the chair swiftly, and without any assistance on my part. I realized she'd been keeping her pace to mine as I thought I was keeping mine to hers. I turned to take my own seat and Ed grinned up at me, offering in his quivering hand, a chiming tea and saucer, which I quickly

took.

"Mr. Delano is interested in Elizabeth," Ed said as he extended another jangling cup and saucer to her. She reached across and took it, leaning out of the chair in a manner I thought unwise.

"What do you know about her?" she asked.

"Mr. Emile Castor has made several, many, at least a thousand paintings of the same woman but nothing near to the quality of this one. That's all I know. I don't know what she was to him. I don't know anything."

"Ed and Theresa both sipped their tea. A look passed between them. Theresa sighed. "You tell him, Ed."

"It begins with Emile Castor arriving in town, a city man clear enough in his red roadster and with a mustache."

"But pleasant."

"He knew his manners."

"He was a sincerely pleasant man."

"He drove up to the chapel and like the idiot he mostly was, turns his back on it and sets up his easel and begins to try to paint the water down below."

"He wasn't an idiot. He was a decent man, and a good businessman. He just wasn't an artist."

"He couldn't paint water either."

"Well, water's difficult."

"Then it started to rain."

"You seem to get a lot."

"So finally he realizes there's a church right behind him and he packs up his puddle of paints and goes inside."

"That's when he sees her."

"Elizabeth?"

"No. Our Lady. Oh, Mr. Delano, you really must see it."

"Maybe he shouldn't."

"Oh, Edward, why shouldn't he?"

"Edward shrugs. "He was a rich man so he couldn't simply admire her without deciding that he must possess her as well. That's how the rich are."

"Edward, we don't know Mr. Delano's circumstances."

"He ain't rich."

"Well, we don't reallyâ€”"

"All you gotta do is look at his shoes. You ain't, are you?"

"No."

"Can you imagine being so foolish you don't think nothing of trying to buy a miracle?"

"A miracle? No."

"Well, that's how rich he was."

"He stayed on while he tried to convince the church to sell it to him."

"Idiot."

"They fell in love."

"Ed grunted."

"They did. They both did."

"He offered a couple a barrels full of money."

"For the painting."

"I gotta say I do believe some on the church board wavered a bit but the women wouldn't hear of it."

"She is a miracle."

"Yep, that's what all the women folk said."

"Edward, you know it's true. More tea, Mr. Delano?"

"Yes. Thank you. I'm not sure I'm following...."

"You haven't seen it yet, have you?"

"Theresa, he just arrived."

"We saw some of those other paintings he did of Elizabeth."

"Ed snorts."

"Well, he wasn't a quitter, you have to give him that."

"Ed bites into a cookie and glares at the teapot."

"What inspired him, well, what inspired him was Elizabeth but what kept him at it was Our Lady."

"So are you saying, do you mean to imply that this painting, this Our Lady is magical?"

"Not magic, a miracle."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It's an icon, Mr. Delano, surely you've heard of them?"

"Well, supposedly an icon is not just a painting, it is the holy manifested in the painting, basically.'

"You must see it. Tomorrow. After the rain stops.'

"Maybe he shouldn't.'

"Why do you keep saying that, Edward? Of course he should see it.'

"Ed just shrugged.

"Of course we didn't sell it to him and over time he stopped asking. They fell in love.'

"He wanted her instead.'

"Don't make it sound like that. He made her happy during what none of us knew were the last days of her life.'

"After she died, he started the paintings.'

"He wanted to keep her alive.'

"He wanted to paint an icon.'

"He never gave up until he succeeded. Finally, he painted our Elizabeth.'

"Are you saying Emile Castor painted that, in the foyer?'

"It took years.'

"He wanted to keep her alive somehow.'

"But that painting, it's quite spectacular and his other work is soâ€œ"

"Lousy.'

"Anyone who enters this house wants to know about her.'

"I don't mean to be rude, but how did she, I'm sorry, please excuse me.'

"Die?'

"It doesn't matter.'

"Of course it does. She fell from the church cliff. She'd gone up there to light a candle for Our Lady, a flame of gratitude. Emile had proposed and she had accepted. She went up there and it started raining while she was inside. She slipped and fell on her way home.'

"How terrible.'

"Oh yes, but there are really so few pleasant ways to die.'

"Our own rain still lashed the windows. The fat calico came into the room and stopped to lick her paws. We just sat there, listening to the rain and the clink of china cup set neatly in saucer. The tea was good and hot. The fire smelled strangely of chocolate. I looked at their two old faces in profile, wrinkled as poorly folded maps. Then I proceeded to make a fool of myself by explaining to them my position as curator of the Castor museum. I described the collection, the beautiful house and location by a stream

visited by deer (but I did not describe the dismal town) and ended with a description of Emile's horrible work, the room filled with poor paintings of their daughter, surely, I told them, Elizabeth belonged there, redeemed against the vast assortment of clowns, for the angel she was. When I was finished the silence was sharp. Neither spoke nor looked at me, but even so, as though possessed by some horrible tic, I continued. "Of course we'd pay you handsomely." Theresa bowed her head and I thought that perhaps this was the posture she took for important decisions until I realized she was crying.

"Ed turned slowly, his old head like a marionette's on an uncertain string. He fixed me with a look that told me what a fool I was and will always be.

"Please accept my apology for being so...." I said, finding myself speaking and rising as though driven by the same puppeteer's hand. "I can't tell you how.... Thank you." I turned abruptly and walked out of the room, angry at my clumsy social skills, in despair actually, that I had made a mess of such a pleasant afternoon. I intended to hurry to my room and read my book until dinner when I would skulk down the stairs and try to find a decent place to eat. That I could insult and hurt two such kind people was unforgivable. I was actually almost blind with self-loathing until I entered the foyer and saw her out of the corner of my eye.

"It is really quite impossible to describe that other thing that brings a painting beyond competent, even beyond beauty into the realm of great art. Of course she was a beautiful woman; of course the lighting, colors, composition, brushstroke, all of these elements could be separated and described, but this still did not account for that ethereal feeling, the sense one gets standing next to a masterpiece, the need to take a deep breath as if suddenly the air consumed by one is needed for two.

"Instead of going upstairs, I went out the front door. If this other painting was anything like the one of Elizabeth, then I must see it.

"It was dark, the rain only a drizzle now, the town a slick black oil, maybe something by Dali with disappearing ink. I had, out of habit, pocketed my car keys. I had to circle the town a few times, make a few false starts, once finding myself in someone's driveway, before I selected the road that arched above the town to the white chapel, which even in the rain glowed as though lit from within. The road was winding but not treacherous. When I got to the top and stood on that cliff the wind whipped me, the town below was lost in a haze of fog that only a few yellow lights shone through. I had the sensation of looking down on the heavens from above. The waves crashed and I felt the salt on my face, tasted it on my lips. Up close the chapel was much larger than it looked from below, the steeple that narrowed to a needle point on which its ship balanced into the dark sky, quite imposing. As I walked up those stone steps I thought again of Edward saying he wasn't sure I should see it. I reached for the hammered iron handle and pulled. For a moment I thought it was locked, but it was just incredibly heavy. I pulled the door open and entered the darkness of the church. Behind me, the door heaved shut. I smelled a flowery smoky scent, the oily odor of wood, and heard from somewhere a faint drip of water as though there was a leak. I was in the church foyer, there was another door before me, marked in the darkness by the thin line of light that shone beneath it. I walked gingerly, uncertain in the dark. It too was extremely heavy. I pulled it open."

He coughed and cleared his throat as though suddenly suffering a cold. She opened her eyes just a slit. The heat from the wood stove must have been the reason for the red in his cheeks, how strange he looked, as though in pain or fever! She let her eyes droop shut and it seemed a long time before he continued, his voice raspy.

"All I can say is, I never should have looked. I wish I'd never seen either of those paintings. It was there that I made myself the promise I would never settle for a love any less than spectacular, a love so great that it would take me past my limitations, the way Emile's love for Elizabeth had taken him past his, that

somehow such a love would leave an imprint on the world, the way great art does, that all who saw it would be changed by it, as I was.

"So you see, when you find me sad and ask what's on my mind, or when I am quiet and cannot explain to you the reason, there it is. If I had never seen the paintings, maybe I would be a happy man. But always, now, I wonder."

She waited but he said no more. After a long time, she whispered his name. But he did not answer and when she peeked at him from the squint of her eyes, he appeared to be asleep. Eventually, she fell asleep too.

All that night, as they told their stories, the flames burned heat onto that icy roof which melted down the sides of the house and over the windows so that in the cold morning when they woke up, the fire gone to ash and cinder, the house was encased in a sort of skin of ice which they tried to alleviate by burning another fire, not realizing they were only sealing themselves in more firmly. They spent the rest of that whole winter in their ice house. By burning all the wood and most of the furniture and eating canned food even if it was out of date, they survived, thinner and less certain of fate, into a spring morning thaw, though they never could forget those winter stories, not all that spring or summer and especially not that autumn, when the winds began to carry that chill in the leaves, that odd combination of Sun and decay, about which they did not speak, but which they knew would exist between them forever.