

DEGAS, C'EST MOI

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I decided to be Degas for a day. Why Degas? *Pourquoi pas* Degas?

Maybe it was the creamy eggshell hue of my ceiling as I lay in bed that morning. Maybe it was all the French table wine. True, I didn't know much about Degas: dead French Impressionist painter of jockeys and ballerinas. And, true, I wasn't French, dead or a painter of any kind. Yet weren't Degas and I united by our humanity? Our common need for love, coffee and deodorant?

I started immediately and brushed my teeth as Degas. Everything seemed different, yet nothing had changed. In the shower, it felt strange, lathering an immortal. Equally strange, the immortal was lathering back. How had I become such a genius? I, who flunked wood shop at my Sheepshead Bay *lycée*? Had it been my traumatic childhood? My lost pencil box? Uncle Stosh's unfortunate party trick with the parakeet?

I tried to comprehend my greatness and immortality as I fried a couple of eggs. While considering the lustrous yellow of the yolks, I incinerated my muffin. Being Degas would take some practice. I went out into the world, with my dry cleaning.

Then I suffered a shock. First, the Pakistani on the corner sold me my paper just as before. Then my dry cleaner showed no change. Finally, as I headed down Broadway and people passed me by without a second glance, I realized: *it made no difference to be Degas*.

But maybe the other Degas had walked this invisibly through Paris, bumped into by bourgeois pedestrians and shouted at by men unloading cabbages at the Left Bank Key Food. Anonymous, I was free to appreciate the gray blur of pigeons, the impasto at Ray's Pizza, the

chiaroscuro of the M7 bus. Anonymity continued at unemployment, where they seemed unfazed when I signed my claim “Edgar Degas” – maybe because the guy ahead of me had signed “Humphrey Bogart” to *his*. Recalling my lifelong interest in jockeys, I stopped at OTB and put five francs on a chestnut filly whose jockey wore brilliant silks of crimson and green but who came in sixth. Who cared? I was Degas.

Famished by creativity, I stopped at Twin Donut. I was scribbling a priceless doodle on my napkin when I noticed someone staring, a young woman writing in a journal. Had she recognized me? She smiled slightly. Yes. She knew I was Degas. Not only that: she *loved* Degas.

Her look redeemed all those years of effort. My work had given meaning to someone’s life. Should I seduce her? It would be traditional. But no. I’d only leave her, hurt her, go back to Doris. Not to mention what it would do to Doris. But wasn’t it my duty as Degas to seduce this girl?

Too late. She had returned to her journal. I could imagine the entry: “Just saw Edgar Degas two tables over. So he likes crullers, too! Suddenly this day is glorious and memorable. Wanted Degas to make love to me all afternoon. Should I tell Steve?”

On Fifth Avenue, Jacqueline Onassis passed me, leading an improbable Doberman. It was blocks before I remembered I was Degas. Other things intruded, too. Money. Job. Athlete’s foot. (Had the discomfort fed my artistry?) The labor of hanging onto one’s identity in the midst of our daily dance! *C’est trop*.

At the Metropolitan Museum, I toured my work, amazed at how much I had accomplished. Of course, we had no television then. I stared into my fathomless eyes in a self-portrait. “Bit smudgy, isn’t it?” a man next to me commented. “So I had a bad day,” I shrugged.

He blinked, not recognizing me, and moved off toward the communicants at Van Gogh's "Self-Portrait With A Straw Hat." If those philistines only knew how Vincent cheated at *boules*...

In front of my "Woman With Chrysanthemums," I remembered facing that same canvas one morning a century ago, paralyzed by its blankness; then I reached for my brush and, *voila*, the image crystallized. This pensive woman oblivious to the transcendent burst of color, the natural exuberance of the flowers versus her human sorrow, our blindness to the beautiful, the immanence of splendor! Would I ever have a day like that again? Would I achieve that shade of red? Would I get home in time to pick up the dry cleaning?

A guard told me to step back. He said I was *too close to the painting*. Inwardly, I laughed at the irony. "Too close to this painting?" I said. He told me to step back again, and I stepped back.

When Doris met me for supper at the Acropolis, I was still exalted. She ordered Alka-Seltzer and said she had typed 28 letters that day. I ordered a Reuben and told her I'd been Degas since morning. She nodded absently. I felt Degas start to slip. Her Alka-Seltzer fizzed. A man was staring at me, something familiar about him. Doris said the toilets at the office had backed up again. I looked at the man and realized: it was Renoir. My old friend gazed at me with such pity that I had to look away. Now Degas was gone.

We walked to my place in silence. I sprawled on the couch with my hands over my eyes while Doris ran the bath water. All my glory, all my fame, all my achievements were utterly forgotten. Immortality? A cruel joke.

Then I looked through the doorway into the bathroom and saw Doris standing naked with her foot up on the edge of the old lion-footed tub, drying herself. The overhead light was dim but

Doris was fluorescent, luminous, with pinks and lavenders and vermilions playing over her skin. The frayed towel in her hands gleamed like a rose. She turned and smiled over her shoulder.

“Degas?” she said.

“Irrelevant, *ma belle*,” I countered, and held out my hand.

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