RYAN SMITH
CARTILAGE (an excerpt)

In the dream I am walking at night through a golden field of wheat. I know it is a dream because the field is settled under the dull light of two moons. They are set in the sky like eyes, watching me, waiting. They are without accusation, without suspicion, yet they know me, know where I am going even though I do not.

I look to the left and think something is approaching through the tall wheat, but it is only the wind, or a pale impression of the wind, and it stops at the edge of the path as if it also is watching me. For a moment the breeze seems to reverberate and a small thicket of wheat leans forward as if curious about my intrusion here. I reach out and brush a hand through the stalks and my first thought is of a lion’s mane.

I also know it is a dream because I’m startled by a sudden murder of crows rising up from the field, and as I stop walking they freeze in mid-air. The low mutter of the wind becomes silence. I take a step forward and for a moment everything continues on, the crows arcing up and disappearing against the black sky. Once more as I stand still so does the world around me. I know what is at work here, as one knows such things in dreams. I smile and take a step backward, time moving with me, and then I take another. The crows return to the field, the wheat stalks pull away from me with something resembling bored dismissal and the wind retreats back across the field, disappearing back to wherever it began.

Through all of this the moons hang in the sky like eyes; there is a question in them, but as I start to answer the dream folds itself away, smaller and smaller and in on itself.

I wake up remembering the way my mother used to show me how to fold origami stars, how you would think of a wish while wrapping the paper, and when you were done you’d throw it upward as hard as you could, and if it didn’t fall you could give it a name and your wish would always come true.

The dreams started a week after I first sat for Vincent. It always felt odd to call him that, but the first time I addressed him as ‘Monsieur Van Gogh’, he looked so offended that I thought for a moment he might
scream at me to leave. He didn’t, but my judgment of his temperament was far more accurate than I believed in that first meeting.

Vincent had a house in the Paris countryside. It had been painted a violent shade of yellow, and as I approached it for the first time I saw sloppy black letters scrawled across the front door: fou roux. The redheaded madman.

I’m not sure what I expected, but the man that answered my call at the door wasn’t the vision of the infamous Vincent van Gogh that I had held in passing. Everything about his countenance spoke in the language of contradiction. He lingered almost lazily in the entranceway with an air of doubt, perhaps distrust, even paranoia. He stood well more than half a foot taller than me with a full red moustache and beard, yet I didn’t feel intimidated in the slightest.

It was his eyes, I think; he looked at me almost with a hint of apprehension, as if he were afraid of offending me.

I had been sitting on the small sofa in what I took to be Vincent’s studio area for only a few minutes when I began to have second thoughts about the entire arrangement. I was already feeling out of place, despite my experience sitting for other artists. There was something very different about Vincent; he carried an air of eccentricity that was unsettling, even as artists went.

“Would you like anything?” he asked. He was already in the process of tipping the contents of a circular bottle of Un Emile absinthe into a dirty glass tumbler.

“No, thank you. I’ve just come from lunch with my sister.”

I remember that I was actually quite tempted by the offer. A taste of the bitter green liquor would have done wonders for my nerves, but I had never been in the habit of drinking with relative strangers.

Despite this, I hated that I had lied already to him — I don’t even have a sister, nor had I been out to lunch with anyone other than myself in weeks. I’ve always found myself prone to such impromptu deceit, and while in this case I understood my mind concocting these little lies, I usually found myself without any justification at all.

Vincent nodded, setting the bottle back down on a small table he had arranged next to his easel, which at the moment was empty. I noticed three more identical bottles resting together on the floor by the table.

“I trust you didn’t have producing a small sketchbook for.

“No at all. The direction helpful. I must say that I love the countryside this time of year.”

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“I’m glad you like it. It’s ing. The canvases aren’t as cold all more clearly.”

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Vincent had just begun in the front door. He excused himself a few moments I became rest far corner of the room, where I sat in dark cloth.

I had barely begun to sit Vincent walked back into the studio as his eyes became large with full brown package he was now holding.

“Stop! No, it isn’t yet fin stand?” Vincent yelled.

“... I’m sorry. I didn’t offend you.”

I don’t know what I was readable, something I didn’t expect seemed torn between righteous and demanding I leave his house, which

“I just—no, you didn’t know is something special. Powerful. I hope you would be able to hear it properly.”

I again found myself coming in the best moment in which to rate anodyne smile, stepping quickly

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“Yes, of course. The very taken?”

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"I trust you didn’t have much trouble finding the house?" he asked, producing a small sketchbook from the table.

"Not at all. The directions you provided me in the letter were very helpful. I must say that I love the color, yellow is striking, especially in the countryside this time of year."

His eyes had turned intently to the sketchbook, and while there wasn’t anything particularly unfriendly in his tone, he was clearly frowning.

"I’m glad you like it. I’ve found that a yellow house is more welcoming. The canvases aren’t as cold to paint on, and the when it rains I can hear it all more clearly."

Very little of what Vincent had said made sense to me, but I smiled and nodded as if I had been looking for such a solution for my own non-existent canvases.

Vincent had just begun sketching when there was faint knock at the front door. He excused himself and disappeared down the hallway. After several long moments I became restless and found myself wandering toward the far corner of the room, where I had previously noticed a large canvas draped in dark cloth.

I had barely begun to lift a lower corner of the covering when Vincent walked back into the studio, a large grin on his face quickly disappearing as his eyes became large with fury. He seemed to have forgotten all about the brown package he was now holding.

"Stop! No, it isn’t yet finished! It isn’t finished, don’t you understand?"

"I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep myself. I didn’t mean to offend you."

I don’t know what I was expecting next. I found Vincent entirely unreadable, something I didn’t expect would change, and indeed it wouldn’t. He seemed torn between righteous anger and a kind of shy fear at the prospect of demanding I leave his house, which is precisely what I was anticipating.

"I just—no, you didn’t know. It just isn’t finished, you see. That piece is something special. Powerful. It has music; it has velocity. I don’t think that you would be able to hear it properly. Not yet."

I again found myself confused by Vincent’s words, but didn’t think it the best moment in which to raise further questions. I attempted my most anodyne smile, stepping quickly away from the canvas.

"I think that will be enough for today’s session. I’m assuming that you will be able to find your way back tomorrow?" he said, sitting back down in front of the empty easel.

"Yes, of course. The very welcoming yellow house, if I’m not mistaken?"

He said nothing, but I thought I saw the slightest intimation of a smile
that I took to be my signal to leave. As I made my way out of Vincent’s small studio, I chanced a brief look over my shoulder to see him taking a large mouthful from the tumbler, his face disfigured into what I could only understand to be fear, eyes unmoving from the draped canvas I had nearly uncovered moments before.

"You don’t have to just sit right there, you know. I understand that you’ve sat for other artists, or at least those who like to think of themselves as artists, and that they find themselves, shall we say, confused by something as crucial and stunning as movement, demanding that their subjects forget their humanity and become statues, but I am not one of those blind fools. Please, make yourself comfortable—even find something to drink if you would like. I promise not to forget you."

"Oh. I understand, thank you. I must say I’ve found it horrible. I never understand how one can sit for weeks, saying nothing, sitting completely still, and yet the final piece can sometimes be so forceful."

"Forceful..." he said, making no attempt to disguise his disgust, "they are fakes. Pathetic fakes, at that. They paint off-key. They think that if they can only find the right model that a masterpiece will surely follow. What they really need is to spend more time listening. All they are able to paint is what they want to see, not what is dancing right out there before them."

I am meandering about the room, finding myself in the position that had become all too familiar of having no response to Vincent’s diatribe.

"In form and moving how express and admirable...the paragon of animals, indeed," Vincent said, seemingly to himself as he continued painting.

"You are a lover of Shakespeare; I should have guessed. Hamlet was always my favorite."

I found it hard to contain a sudden eagerness to draw myself into the conversation, as the opportunity was a rarity.

"Yes. That one listened. He could create movement in ways even I will never dream of finding. He is what they starve for, every last one of them."

A question found itself in my mind, one that had come so many times over the several weeks I had been visiting Vincent, and the unexpected exchange between us had given me the courage to put it forth.

"Vincent, I am certain that I am painting a portrait, aren’t you? Of me?"

The question had come hardly ever seemed to look at me, that he hadn’t so much as glance.

"Your question is hardly a portrait. At least, not in any manner."

While I had grown accustomed, this was the first time I felt needed for me to understand. He puzzled expression, smiling with

"I understand that it is prepared with memory, but tell me that won’t sing, if I only know where (and so on)..."
I made my way out of Vincent’s small studio in order to see him taking a large canvas into what I could only understand as movement, demanding that I become statues, but I am make yourself comfortable—even if it sometimes be so forceful.”

I attempted to disguise his disinterest. They paint off-key. They model that a masterpiece will spend more time listening. I want to see, not what is dancing

Vincent, I am certain this is a foolish question, but you are painting a portrait, aren’t you? Of me?”

The question had come as I realized more and more that Vincent hardly ever seemed to look at me at all. Days would pass where I was sure that he hadn’t so much as glanced in my direction.

“Your question is hardly foolish. Yes, it is of you. But no, it is not a portrait. At least, not in any manner that you might understand it to be.”

While I had grown accustomed to Vincent’s tendency to be abstract, this was the first time I felt as if he had said something he never intended for me to understand. He paused his work at the easel and eyed my puzzled expression, smiling with what might have been embarrassment.

“I understand that it is perverse to expect this canvas to be embedded with memory, but tell me that it holds no such promise. Tell me that it won’t sing, if I only know where to touch it.”

(an excerpt)