

BRANDES' DECISION

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*Translated from the Catalan
by Mara Faye Lethem*

HB Hispabooks
Publishing

Hispabooks Publishing, S. L.
Madrid, Spain
www.hispabooks.com

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Originally published in Spain as *La decisió de Brandes* by Editorial Empúries, 2006
First published in English by Hispabooks, 2016
English translation copyright © by Mara Faye Lethem
Design © simonpates - www.patesy.com
Cover image: Color wheel designed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1809.

ISBN 978-84-944262-1-6 (trade paperback)
ISBN 978-84-943658-2-3 (ebook)
Legal Deposit: M-9983-2016

The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Institut Ramon Llull

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Catalan Language and Culture

To Montse Inga

That which is not taken, but remains, is the best of us.

GEORGES BRAQUE

“You decide,” he told me. At that point I hardly knew anything about him. All I knew was that his name was Hofer, Walter Andreas Hofer, that he went around Paris looking for art for Göring’s private collection and that, when he put his mind to it, he could be quite persuasive. “You decide.” His was a confident voice, used to setting the terms; used to wielding fear and shattering people’s ability to choose. “If you want your paintings back, all you have to do is give me the Cranach.” The Cranach. I know it like the back of my hand. I close my eyes and I see it. Without shadows. With the clarity of dreams: the three figures, the steeply sloping landscape, the threatening clouds. “You decide. But don’t think it over too long, I haven’t got all the time in the world.” Words that smother the last slits that allowed in breathable air, words that weigh like a slab of slate. Then he closed the door carefully, as

if he didn't need to employ noise to intimidate me yet. Not when his glance was enough to send chills down my spine. Even now, twenty-two years later, when I come across a photograph of Hofer, I feel his gaze wandering around my studio and piercing my eyes. Incisive. Angular as an idol sculpted by hatchet blows.

At first I didn't understand his offer. I knew they'd emptied out my dealer's gallery with the excuse that he was a Jew, and that they'd taken every last one of my paintings, but I never imagined that, on some crazy whim of Göring's, they'd be willing to swap them all for my Cranach. "He owns many, but he adds to his collection whenever he gets the chance," he added. I still have the list with the titles and sizes of my paintings, a copy made with carbon paper on the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg letterhead. All very official and seemingly aboveboard. Even the pillaging and theft. "Maybe this will help you decide," Hofer said. Not a single word more. And he put a couple of pages on one of my easels. Through the window, I saw him get into the backseat of a car stopped at the entrance to the alley. I remember the lump in my throat, the rain-damp grass between the paving stones, the beating in my chest, neck, temples. As if all the silence of the afternoon had transformed into a heart stunned by dread. Or by rage.

I didn't know what to do for quite some time. I just paced up and down with the list in my hand. Sixty-eight numbered paintings. Titles and measurements. I even read some of them out loud. Maybe to share my discomfiture with the mute figures of the easels: "*Seated Nude*, 53 x 47.5; *Still Life With Dice*, 46.5 x 36; *Forest*, 94 x 113; *Red House*, 98 x 76; *Woman By The Water*, 53.2 x 48.3." Up and down, with the floorboards creaking under my feet and my eyes fogged by tears. I had never before felt so trapped between these four walls.

My studio hasn't changed much. I like to remain loyal to the objects that have been my companions for so many years. But only the necessary ones, because I'm not interested in accumulating layers, just maintaining essential links to my past: Grandma Johanna's rocking chair; Mom's sewing box where I keep my brushes; the Giotto, Vermeer, Velázquez, Van Gogh, and Matisse reproductions pinned to the wall; the old, paint-smearred easels; the zoetrope my father gave me as a boy, where the same sheep from my childhood still jumps, tirelessly, over the same wooden fence; the books; the photographs; the illustration, taken from a medieval bestiary, of a dragon clinging to an elephant's neck . . . During the occupation, I lived here as well. It seemed like a good way, without just leaving the city, to avoid running

into soldiers and swastikas everywhere and having to act like that was normal. That way I didn't have to be out on the street as much. It probably wasn't the bravest or most committed choice, especially when there was talk of acts of sabotage by the Resistance, but I'd always believed that my only homeland was painting, with the loyalty that entails. Until Hofer's visit. Even though I was slow to realize the importance of his extortion. "You decide." Just two words, but enough to transform any certainty into a nightmare. Nothing was reasonable or convincing enough to help me decide. And the curfew and the darkness, the solitude and the silence made it more difficult, especially over never-ending nights, my eyes piercing the void. Despondently.

Like now. Since death began hovering over me, exhaustion gnaws away at the few moments of peace this uneasy situation allows me. I give myself over to the passing hours, aware of the clock hands, of the murmur that still connects me to a routine I've moved beyond, of the traces of fragility that, day after day, are added to the furrows in my body. I often wonder about the moment that, like an arch's keystone, gives meaning to my life. Maybe not the happiest or the most intense, but at least the one that will keep me from being bitter over everything I could have done, over all the wrong turns, over

all the unspoken words. And I search through my past, I rummage through my memory to retake the path that brought me here and find that moment. Unmistakable and definitive. Luminous like the eyes on Cranach's Madonna. Or like the green of the damp, shiny grass between the alley's paving stones after Hofer's visit.

My father often talked about the soul of colors, about their ability to influence our feelings. He was a chemist, but his fondness for painting compelled him to study pigments. And he could turn dry terms like lazurite, aluminum silicate, or sulfur into fascinating stories, like Marco Polo's trip to the lapis lazuli quarries in Badakhshan at the mouth of the Amu Darya River, or magical tales, like the legend of the dragon blood that transformed into cinnabar. I heard them so many times—evening after evening over weeks, stretched out on the bed in my dusky room—that I can still remember Marco Polo's words: "In the earth there are veins of the stones used to make this blue, and mountains with mines of silver, copper and lead. And the plain is very cold." Other nights, thanks to my father's skill as a storyteller, I had no trouble imagining the dragon patiently waiting up in a tree to leap on its eternal enemy; then its fierce battle with the elephant, especially when its eyes got plucked out; the agonizing dragon trapped

beneath the dying elephant, and the sand dyed red. I guess I paint to recreate my childhood. Ever since I was very little, sitting in my father's study among the illustrations by Laugel and Blanc of chromatic stars that hung on the walls, I would play with the colors while I repeated his stories to myself. And maybe it's always been like that. In fact, one of the paintings on Hofer's list, *Blue Landscape*, is inspired in the cold of the Afghan plain that Marco Polo visited. If I close my eyes and think of it, I can bring back the welcoming, almost hypnotic cadence of my father's voice reading the *Travels of Marco Polo* as I drifted off to sleep: "In the earth there are veins of the stones used to make this blue, and mountains with mines of silver, copper and lead. And the plain is very cold."

I'm cold too. Always. It's as if the tumor absorbed my warmth and turned it into a thin layer of frost that covers the inside of my body. Sometimes, when I shiver from head to toe, I imagine that I'm Marco Polo walking through the quarries of Badakhshan and I'm consoled by the intense blue of the river, by the flying falcons, by the shrieks of the riders on shoeless horses, by the musky scent of the women dressed in silks. And I would give anything to scale the mountains that surround the frozen plain, where the air is so pure and revitalizing that it cures all illnesses. But death won't give me that opportunity. According to the

doctor, there's nothing for me to worry about. Even though he doesn't dare to tell me, I know I don't have much time. His eyes, his gestures, his voice betray him. It's odd, because people talk to the dying, just like they do kids, in a special way. As if death's proximity can only be confronted with vague words, with words that, unintentionally, mix affection and fear, fake sincerity and sadness, commiseration and distancing.

Death. Like the light that comes through the window and plays with the dust floating in the air, its color is constantly changing. Sometimes, seated in front of the easel, when my hands can hold the brushes, I try to capture it, but fail. Perhaps because I'm incapable of deciphering my true feelings. Since Alma died, six years ago, I move restlessly between my eagerness to disappear and my refusal to accept surrender. I've never missed anyone so much. Maybe my father. Or my mother, although I can't remember, because she died too soon. Just like Alma. Too soon for both of us: she left so much undone; and I didn't have her with me long enough to be able to accept her absence now. How I wish she were here now. I'm sure she could find the right words to help me.

I met her at the theater, shortly after the war. During rehearsals for *The Human Voice*, by Cocteau. Even though I had read the play to make sketches for the poster they'd commissioned, I was impressed

by the power of her monologue. I remember Alma's unsettling presence, barefoot and with her hair uncombed, wearing a jacket over her slip, moving over the stage with a telephone in her hand; the inflections of her voice, adapting to the sinuous text like melted wax: from whispers to shouting, from fear to remorse; the cutting intensity of the silences, with her eyes lit up and her body tense, lying in wait for the absent words of the lover who has just left her. I returned to the theater a few times after that first evening, even though I didn't need to for the poster. It was just to see her. Now I have to settle for a recording of the play she made right before she died. I listen to it often. I put on the record and close my eyes. For a little while, Alma's voice lessens the cold and the dread, staves off the clawing loneliness.

It took me some time to make up my mind. One late afternoon though, I approached the stage to talk to her. "You're not sick of listening to me yet?" she asked. On that first meeting, Alma was very taciturn. Over time, I realized that was just a protective strategy to disarm people and keep them at a distance. Yet once the obstacles were overcome, she opened up with surprising candor. Like on her first visit to my studio. "I want you to paint me," she said. "Now." When she saw me preparing the paper and charcoal, she laughed. "You didn't understand what

I meant. I want you to paint my body.” And she took off her clothes, in silence, without looking at me. For hours, as if I were once again magically protected by Laugel and Blanc’s chromatic stars hanging in my father’s study, I traveled over her body with my brushes and my fingers smeared in paint, I turned it into a chaos of shapes and colors. With no obstacles or limits. Painting had never given me such intense pleasure, such feverish eroticism. It wasn’t the last time. My years with Alma were the best years of my life. And since she’s no longer here, like the woman who clung to the telephone in *The Human Voice*, I feel as if I’m in a diving suit and someone’s cut the tube that was keeping me connected to the surface.

As it progresses, life transforms into an accumulation of absences. People, objects, landscapes, colors . . . Paintings. And I paced up and down with Hofer’s list in my hand and a lump in my throat: “*House On The Hill*, 60 x 45; *Seated Figure*, 70 x 88; *Green Interior*, 68 x 70 . . .” Every title conjured up a unique story: the hills of my childhood, my mother’s distracted gaze, the clarity of the dusk sifting through the studio’s curtains . . . “You decide.” The paintings or the Cranach. They say that Göring had more than seventy. He took them directly from collectors or museums or swapped them for works by banned painters: four Kirchners, seven Groszes, twelve

Noldes for three Cranachs; six Kandinskys, a Picasso, five Grises and eight Schieles for two Cranachs. Hofer's list for one Cranach. My Cranach.

My father gave it to me shortly before he died. When I asked him where he had gotten it, he gave me one of those enigmatic smiles of his. I'd always found them unsettling, ever since I was quite small, because they were unpredictable. He sometimes smiled that way before scolding me for some misdeed or while he proudly savored one of my modest successes, like a tooth pulled without a tear or a drawing prize at school. Sometimes I think that it was merely a smirk, an involuntary sign of confusion at having to express his feelings. Because my father was a man of contrasts. He could be the most affable person in the world, but he had a hard time showing his emotions. There was always a hidden, inaccessible space. After losing Alma, I realized that perhaps my mother's death left him, too, without breathable air.

I know that they first saw each other in front of a Cranach. I can imagine the situation perfectly, because I heard him explain it many times. Father, stock still, focused, at just the right distance from the painting so he could take it all in as a whole without missing the small details. Everything at once. Balance. He always talked about the balance between the whole and the parts. And about the

color, the color particularly. Not Mother. She was never still. Back and forth. To the right, to the left. From the other end of the room or with her face a few inches from the painting. As if she could only capture the essence of the work when she was in motion. Usually my father had a few choice words for anyone who disrupted his enjoyment of a painting but, on that day, he didn't say a thing. Something about her left him speechless. "Her eyes," he told me many years later. "Of the softest green, like malachite pigment. Like yours." What I don't know is what she must have thought of that stern man who watched her out of the corner of his eye until she left the room. Even though eight months passed before fate brought them together again, father said that he would occasionally visit the Cranach just to bring her to mind more vividly.

Curiously, now that my days are numbered, I feel I've become a haven for those who are gone; for the isolated, arbitrary, and vague memories of those who came before me. Memories that will vanish along with me, because Alma and I never had any children. We would have liked to, but it was too late. Now it would be a comfort to know that something of me would live on in someone. A physical trait, a way of smiling or moving their hands, an expression. Or memories of Alma. Or of me. Or my father's stories.

But I am the last link in a genealogy of shadows. After me, there will only be room for oblivion.

It's raining. The color of the damp grass between the paving stones hasn't changed. It persists with the steadfastness of the words and feelings that trigger the memories. It was also raining the day Hofer brought his list and, like today, the scent of damp earth came drifting up from the alley. That smell is inextricably linked to two highly contradictory feelings: the safety of my bed, as a child, when the aroma of the garden slipped in through the window, winning out over the terrifying wrath of the thunderclaps; and, a handful of years later, the paralyzing disquiet of indecision. Even though it didn't match up with what I'd been told about Hofer, I spent a few days telling myself that maybe he'd end up forgetting his offer and leave me alone, that surely there was more tempting prey, that just one Cranach wasn't worth wasting more time on. Despite that, I was constantly on guard, tensing over murmurs in the stairwell or cars stopping at the entrance to the alley. I tried to paint but every once in a while my eyes would happen to land on Hofer's list, and I would get a knot at the top of my stomach. Then, like an unrelenting echo, his words floated among the objects in the room and obfuscated the comforting presence of the Cranach.