



A RESCUE

I now live with 19 people, and a shy dog, in my one-bedroom apartment. In the distance, I spot more figures crossing Central Park and heading my way, others boarding the F train, and the shadow of a skateboarder pushing off toward me. There is also the cowboy on horseback heading to his Dakota farmstead. These are painted figures, all of whom stare at me from my walls. Every one of these men and women is handsome or pretty. I choose my roommates carefully.

The newest face and torso to come reside with me almost didn't make it. But as of a day ago, he now occupies the last remaining free space on my white living room walls; if I were to squeeze in, salon-style, any more paintings or photographs, the walls would more closely resemble tapestries.

With this newest acquisition, it has been reconfirmed for me that just as each painting tells a story, so does each painting have a story behind its acquisition. That, too, is part of the pleasure of acquiring a new work.

For years, I have passed a junk shop/antiques store on Second Avenue in my neighborhood, one of those increasingly rare Manhattan businesses that defy gentrification and rent increases. How many hingeless Chinese jewelry boxes, chipped African wooden masks, and paint-flecked still life paintings can this proprietor possibly sell to pay his rent? Though I always suspected that the shop carried good paintings — exactly the kind of portraits and cityscapes I like, given what I could see through the window and stacked on the sidewalk — I never actually went inside. Something about the owner, a disheveled, shoeless, sour man, has prevented me from entering, though I often slow down while passing his shop, then continue on, trying to convince myself there is likely nothing inside to appeal to me.

For years, I had seen people walk out of the store pursued by the owner muttering after them or, worse, hectoring them, calling out prices as

they vanished into the river of sidewalk traffic. On Memorial Day, while waiting with a friend for the arrival of a rental car, we decided to fill some time by going into the shop.

As soon as we entered, the proprietor trailed us as we negotiated his dank, dusty space, which made Sanford & Son look like Tiffany & Company. A single pathway emerged through the goods that had grown as deep as a wild forest. As we flipped through layers of paintings leaning against tumbled furniture and rolled Oriental rugs, I came upon a portrait of a young man, and my friend, Jose, said immediately upon seeing it, "That one's for you."

He knows my likes and who and what populates the walls of my apartment. I feigned a mild, if not dismissive, interest in the painting, so as not to alert the owner to raise his price.

"By very famous European artist," he said without my asking anything. "A thousand dollars. And that is bargain for you, my friend."

My lack of enthusiasm fueled his hostility. "What, that's too much? Okay, okay, \$750 then. You take it right now before I change my mind."

Again, despite my polite utterances about needing to think about it and how I was about to go out of town for the day, the owner kept lowering the price, each figure said as if in response to a taunt. "Now you are insulting me," he said. "This comes from major European collection. You're not respecting what I tell you."

Finally, acknowledging to myself that I wanted the painting but wouldn't be able to take it then since my friend and I really were going out of town, we started to leave the shop. The owner grabbed my arm and held it. "Two hundred dollars right now. You take it."

When I re-explained how I needed to think about it, that I lived in the neighborhood and would likely return, he said, "Don't ever come in my shop again. You go."

And he pushed us out, shutting the door behind us. My entrée into the summer.

Despite this interaction — an unprovoked, one-sided argument — I could not stop thinking of the seated, even-featured young man on canvas, his contemplative downward gaze, the beautiful amalgam of aqua, teal, greens, and blues in which he lived. I wanted the work but didn't want to give the proprietor my business or have to confront him again. I had encountered similar sales "negotiations" in Morocco. There, such bartering is cultural — and it's an insult to the seller not to participate. I had examined some soapstone-carved minarets at a Rabat souvenir stand and was virtually chased down the alleyway of the bazaar by the seller and his sons, demanding I buy them — not exactly menacingly, but aggressively. I followed them back to the stall and bought three of the objects, an exhausting enterprise. I look at the carvings daily now in my apartment and am grateful to own them. And I have the tale to tell, too, of their purchase.

With a few days' perspective, I reasoned that to buy the painting in the shop on Second Avenue was akin to rescuing a dog from the pound. This picture deserved a good and loving home. There was something about bringing the handsome figure into my apartment that would mean rescuing him and the painter from a kind of exile. There were many paintings in the shop by the same artist (the name EBERSON appears scrawled in capital letters on the edge of each canvas), perhaps someone deceased, a cache of works acquired at an estate sale. Just as we acknowledge someone deceased with a toast or a gift to a charity in their name, I felt it a duty to honor the painter by buying the work.

I returned to the shop a few days later, but hesitated — passing it on the other side of Second Avenue, hoping perhaps it might be closed or that someone else was running it. Then I crossed the street and walked past, re-crossing again at the corner. I then reasoned with myself as a 50-something-year-old man that I could certainly



The author has given this unnamed, unsigned portrait (40 x 30 in.) the title *Edgar, After His Swim*; it now hangs in his living room.

summon up the resolve to walk in, deal with the owner, and leave with the painting.

The owner was sitting, morosely, on the floor, his mood as gray as the interior. I went to the painting, which I had rearranged in the pile where I first saw it in order to protect and conceal it should I return.

I said, pulling it out, "What was the price on this again?"

"I swear on my mother's grave, \$300," the owner said.

"Last time you said \$200."

I held up my ATM-dispensed bills, crisp and new, and kept repeating with each figure he shouted out, "Two hundred."

I prevailed. I gave him the bills, and he (to my surprise) held up a large garbage bag into which I slipped the canvas. He thanked me and I thanked him (also to my surprise), and I left. We don't have to love the process of the purchase, just the purchase itself.

I now live with a handsome new figure, one who is both suggestive and defined. Some facial features are lost in abstraction; others, such as his neatly combed black hair, are refined. After residing only one day in my home, the figure reflects different hues. I first hung it on my wall in the early evening, when dusk was tinting Manhattan. The painting assumed a glamorous glow in that sharp, clear light, infused with

the pink of sunset. At night, in lamplight, the aqua blues radiated, jewel-like. And this morning, upon awakening, the colors and forms are calmer, flatter, more painterly.

Over time, I will have seen the painting and its figure at every hour of the day, in every light and season until he may no longer startle me. But that is what comes with familiarity, with getting to know someone so well that you simply expect his presence, rather than being surprised by it. ●

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