

13. HEART OPERATION

“You’ll never make any money if you stick to abstract painting.”

“One of the galleries has already offered me a show. I’ve sold some paintings to be displayed in some of the major buildings in the city. I’d say I have a fine career.”

“I can get you some real work.”

“Doing what?”

“Portraits. Serious money.”

He laughs at his patron, “What are you calling serious?”

“Thirty thousand a painting.”

“You’re shitting me!”

He hands Daniel his card. Daniel fingers it for a few seconds. Then he puts it in his pocket.

Daniel has always had a dream of being an influential artist. It is not enough to have shows. Or to make money. He wants people to think of him in the same manner that they reference a Johns, a Pollock, a Motherwell.

“There’s money to be made. But I have to be patient.”

“It could all dry up in a matter of seconds. And then where would you be? It’s not as if you have a fortune waiting for you in a bank somewhere.”

“I’m young. I have time.”

“You have ambitions. You have to bank them. Do this! Build up a war chest. Then you have all the time in the world to become a masterful presence.”

Daniel does a good job with his early commissions. The good word spreads around the state about him. He finds that he is traveling around Georgia to perfect his craft.

With her mother, Laurène Grayson moves to Macon when she was sixteen. She has always claimed New Orleans descent although the rumors maintain that the mother has escaped an abusive Valdosta husband. Laurène majors in communications at Mercer. She hopes for a career in TV. But the lure of the wealthy software executive, David Grayson, proves too much for the sweet magnolia. And she is married just out of college. She still wants her own career, but the life of a young socialite inhibits her plans. Nevertheless, her ambitions are realized in a jet set lifestyle. Another of the daring nouveau riche who have scandalized the fair city over the years.

David wants a portrait of his wife in the style of the illustrious Southern matrons. Maybe a touch of Scarlett O’Hara if that doesn’t seem too backward. After all, he is still trying to maintain his liberal credentials. He just wants to be taken seriously by Macon high society.

“The portrait will help ensure our legacy!”

Daniel doubts that his portrait will have the expected effect. But he really can’t turn down the money. For his part, he wants to do everything that he can to capture that incredible elusiveness of Laurène Grayson.

“You’re not afraid of me spending too much time with your wife.”

“She’s a creative person. It will do her good to have your wit and insight to keep her entertained.”

Daniel tries to digest David’s words. After all, Daniel trusts himself. But he hardly

understands the actual intentions of either Laurène or David.

“I’ve never known a painter. At least, not intimately. My cousin did some painting. I had a few college friends who dabbled.”

Daniel wants to interject, but she is so immersed in her own vision that he doesn’t say a thing.

“You really can’t do someone’s portrait unless you know them inside and out.”

“I’m a visual artist. I try to learn from visual clues.”

“Would you prefer that I was naked or clothed for the sitting?”

“We’re not doing a nude.”

“Wouldn’t that shock my husband?”

“Then I would never get my fee.”

“But you wouldn’t mind seeing me naked so that you could get the anatomy right?”

“That’s not how it works.”

He feels that Laurène is pushing his buttons just to get him to make a move that will eventually provoke David. He tries to ignore her intent.

“I’m here to do a job, Mrs. Grayson. This is all about business.”

“If I’m going to give you my best face, I want a little fun.”

“That’s all well and good. I just don’t want anything getting too outlandish.”

“Laurène Grayson outlandish. I have taste.”

“Yes, you do!”

Daniel marvels at the uncouth nature of the girl. Her husband has only encouraged her.

One day he catches her dressing. She can’t see a thing. But he watches every detail of her morning preparation through the open door. She assumes that he wouldn’t arrive until later, so this accounts for the door’s ajar. There is something entirely natural about her gestures. He justifies his eavesdropping by his artistic vocation. If he is to capture her soul in his portrait, he has to see the source of its furious character.

His imaginary paint brush captures more than an effect. He wants to intrude upon her isolation. To violate her sanctity!

“I hear that you’re a naughty little boy.”

He is afraid that she has caught him in the act.

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Why is it always me who is trying to tell you something? Why are you really here?”

“The portrait.”

“You could already do that with your eyes closed.”

He wants to tell her that he can’t touch her in his imagination. He needs the real thing. But he has promised not to flirt with her.

“I’m going to be a very unhappy girl if you don’t complement me now and then.”

He wants to do something in his portrait that will certainly get under her skin. She is wary of his maneuvers.”

“I don’t want to look severe. Don’t mock me, or you will not get your money.”

“I have a contract!”

“Only the living can collect on their debts!”

She stung him with a well-placed blow!

The give and take carries on for a few weeks. She can hardly maintain the solemnity of her pose.

“Are you naturally jumpy?”

If she can't maintain her calm, he does all that he can to make up for her.

“You are a wild thing!”

“You want to have sex with me?”

“Does this kind of thing work in Macon? Because in Atlanta, we expect women to be a little more polite.”

“Quit lying to me. I know about artist models. How many girls have you got into bed by telling them that you'll paint them?”

“You misunderstand. I'm a serious artist.”

His devotion to his art is something that is new to her. She wants to tame this passion. But he speaks a different language.

“You were watching me naked. You're like every man that I've met since I was kid. All it takes is a hard dick, and you think that you rule the world.”

“So where is your part in all this, Queen Bee!”

“I'm not going to sleep with you if that's what you're after.”

He puts his heart into the portrait. If she won't yield, he will make the canvas do his bidding.

“You are a taskmaster.”

“How so?”

“I give you the brush off, and you still put your all in your work.”

“The brush off. I thought that was advanced flirting. You Macon girls have a lot to learn.”

He can offer her so much more than David Grayson. And her posing has already won her a place in his heart.

“I'm going to sneak in your room tonight.”

“No, I am going to sneak into yours. And make love to you while you sleep next to your husband.”

“He's a light sleeper. And he keeps a gun by the bed.”

“I like danger.”

The feisty portrait is the key. He is ready to enact his dangerous moves. Laurène is so excited that she considers giving her husband knock out drops. Then she doubts that Daniel will even attempt his dare.

“I thought that you chickened out.”

He puts his hand on her mouth.

“Do you like it rough?”

“I can tell that you love to scream?”

David curls up on his side of the bed.

She finally announces, “It is time to leave my husband and get a divorce.”

All that she is able to salvage are her clothes.

“You left me. The courts are not going to give you a thing. You have a new man. And I have a pre-nup.”

The two of them abscond to Atlanta so she can partake of his fortune. It isn't enough for him to cohabit with Mme Laurène. She is going to need a ring on her finger if he is ever going to keep her in his corner. So she settles for the meager life as a painter's wife.

For a season, she is able to keep up appearances. But after that, the old frocks are not enough to elevate her spirits. And a painter's salary can hardly satisfy all her whims.

"I am doing well with my portraits."

"Well for you alone and your playboy lifestyle. But now you have a wife."

"You have to learn to live within your means."

"My tastes have been sharpened by a graceful lifestyle. You can no doubt accommodate to my ravenous appetites!"

She hints that her sexual ecstasy has been and will always be coincident with her ability to acquire new artefacts to proclaim their extravagance.

"I've always had some doubts about you."

Their sexual athleticism seems a thing of the past. And he is now is driven to fatigue by her litany of demands. Even if he wanted to, he can no longer satiate her enormous needs.

"Maybe you should hire some assistants. Then you could turn out portraits a lot faster."

"I am not a factory."

He is more afraid that he has no time for his own artistic projects.

"I will never have a name of my own. After my death, no one will remember a thing about my work."

"Your portraits will survive."

"In the style of Sergeant. I am a hundred years behind the times."

"You are surviving. And you have a wonderful wife."

She continues to sparkle with all the glory of her past magnificence. But there are moments when he would like to obliterate that image from the face of the earth.

"Where were you?"

"I was out."

"Out?"

"You're cooped up in that studio of yours painting all the time. I want some stimulation. I met some friends. I had some drinks."

"Friends?"

"Friends. Something that's in pretty short supply for you. There are people out there. And they all consider me charming."

"I once considered you charming!"

"You don't anymore."

"You don't really give me a chance. You're out all the time."

"I can't very well stay in. This house is barely big enough for two people. And then you have your models in here. This is hopeless. It's like a zoo."

"We don't even sleep together."

"I can't sleep in the same bed with you. You toss and turn all night. You should see a psychiatrist. He can give you something for your nervousness."

"Any other girl would be happy."

"If you can find a girl who would call this happiness, bring her in off the street, and I'll go

on my merry way.”

“Laurène, I love you!”

“I want to say that I love you too, but you’re going to have to earn my love back.”

“Have you ever thought about getting a job? You have enough contacts in the city. It might preoccupy you in a more constructive way.”

“I was born to go to parties. To have men get me drinks all night. To realize my full potential as a great beauty. You must have realized this when you first did my portrait.”

Daniel has difficulty reasoning with her. She doesn’t want to listen to his arguments. And he doesn’t want to lose her. He continues to devote himself to turning out portraits.

At night, he gets needs to get used to her new circle of friends. They all show up when the bars close.

“Daniel, this is Antoine. And this is Patrick. And this is Bill. Bill has loads of money.”

“That is fantastic.”

“Get them all some drinks.”

The Three Musketeers. At least, she is including him in the party.

As the inklings of dawn rolls around, the revelers are still out in force.”

“Honey, I’m really tired. I have a lot of work to do in the morning. I have to get to bed.”

“You do that. Save a place for me.”

Despite the late night, he gets up early to start his work. The living room is still a mess. He spends a solid hour putting the bottles and glasses away. Then he begins to do all the dishes. Only then can he start his own work.

When Antoine walks out the guest bedroom, it takes him by surprise. Daniel has been lost in his own work. It is almost noon. And this stranger is in the house.

“Your wife is a hot babe.”

“That she is.”

“Where is she?”

“She went somewhere with Bill. They were supposed to come back.”

“They’re not doing drugs together.”

Daniel has often feared that she has a weakness for drugs. He wonders why the loads of money that he makes are never enough.

She traipses in the middle of the afternoon.

“I got up early. I went to the gym. I did some shopping.”

“Antoine said that you went off with Bill.”

“Antoine just wants to fuck me. He’s a little possessive.”

“You let him stay in the guest room.”

“He couldn’t very well stay in our bed.”

“Where did you sleep?”

“I don’t know. I just woke up on the couch. I changed, and then I went out.”

“I was up early. I didn’t see you.”

“I was up earlier.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“I had my coffee. I am going to take a nap. Is Antoine still here?”

“I gave him some breakfast, and then I sent him off into the world.”

“I wanted to say good by,”

As time goes by, there are more Antoines. And more sleepovers. He can never put his finger exactly what is going on. He can't stay awake long enough to monitor things.

“Dear, I love you. But I told you when I got married: one man is never enough for me.”

“Are you fucking these guys?”

“Heavens no! You are the only one who has my heart.”

He can hardly prove a thing. He barely has the time.

“We are going to have to do something, or we are going to end up in the poorhouse. This place is too much of an embarrassment for my friends.”

“Who are you Laurène?”

“I am the free spirit that you married. You have become a fuddy-duddy. You're no longer good in the sack.”

“You are a bitch!”

“I can fix it all. Bill knows someone who has a great idea to make loads of money. It's a burgeoning investment in the health field.”

“I have no money! You've taken it all.”

“Now, dear. Be nice. This is a way to earn money. You will be the investment. A bridge between art and science.”

“Really?”

“Will you meet his friend?”

“I'm very busy.”

“You need to do this!”

“Need to?”

“If you don't do something to change things, I am going to leave you.”

He reluctantly agrees to meet the entrepreneur.

Bill shows up with his associate. The associate has an arm full of charts. He sets up his easel and begins the presentation. Laurène is enraptured by the presentation. Daniel remains skeptical.

“What do you think of the method?”

“Fascinating.”

She grabbed his arm and gritted her teeth, “Is that all that you have to say?”

“I'm curious.”

“Fascinating ! Curious! You're going to have to say a lot more if I'm going tolerate your bull shit.”

“It seems a little far-fetched. An operation that doesn't use instruments.”

“Exactly. One that takes advantage of the color spectrum to invade the human body.”

“I have to say that it resembles some kind of primitive ritual. It has nothing to do with science.”

“It is the most update thing. People will spend loads of money to do this kind of thing. The person who succeeds at the will become famous.”

“There are a lot of risk involved. I don't know why anyone would even try it.”

“Anyone? You are going to be that anyone. You are going to learn the method inside out. You are going to find the suitable patient. And you are going to succeed.”

“I’m not a doctor. I could get arrested for just talking about it.”

“This is America. It’s a free country. And the government or the AMA can’t do anything to stop this because there is no cutting. No danger to the patient.”

“There has to be some law against it.”

“None whatsoever. It’s totally within bounds.”

“I don’t feel qualified.”

“You are going to read about it.”

“I need to do my portraits. We have expenses that I have to meet. We owe money due to your lifestyle.”

“Don’t blame me for your own weakness. You are going to do this! No questions asked. I am going to get you sponsors. And I have a little money stashed away to tide us over.”

She is going to get him sponsors. She will have to do more if he is going to commit himself to this project.

“You have become a terrible husband. I left David for you. I left a wonderful marriage and a beautiful home. And it has been nothing but hell since I have been here. You’re not even a good lover.”

“I try!”

“You are pathetic.”

Daniel realizes that he has no choice. He does all that he can to absorb the method. He becomes the best salesperson. He explains it to one of his few remaining friends.

“I had seen the painting of the surgeons huddled stupefied around the operating table. It was a theater, and there was an audience surrounding the stage. They watched the performers doing their thing.”

“You know what that painting represents.”

“An antiquated procedure. A breakthrough in medical techniques.”

“You’re kidding me. That painting was from over a hundred years ago.”

“You don’t understand. This is a breakthrough for contemporary science. A new way of looking at surgery. Without any form of instruments. This is brilliant. It is as if the artist has taught us a lesson about matter.”

He is confused by Daniel’s argument. An operation without instruments.

If Daniel is to be successful, he is going to need to find a patient. Bill’s associate has the perfect candidate. The man has had health problems. But he is steady on his feet. The procedure could be the trick to get his life in order.

“Has he been checked out by a real doctor?” “Daniel is cautious.

“He’s seen an army of physicians. None of them has offered him any miracles.”

“I have no idea if this can even work.”

“You are going to make it work.”

Yes, he is going to make it work.

The advent of the operation brings with it loads of press. Bill and Laurène think that it will be a waste of time to do the procedure if there is not the maximum of hype. With each new story, there is a slew of investors. With the renown, there is the scrutiny. The biggest fear is that the FDA or some other governmental organization might try to shut it down. Bill pays off the officials at the regulatory agencies. They will all try to cash in when his company expands.

With each successive day, there are more reporters at the house. Laurène is always posing for pictures. Bill is doing all that he can to sell his investment. And Daniel is doing his best to go along. He gets caught in the maelstrom. Laurène just feeds him new scripts. And he does his best to recite his lines.

“Honey, a couple of drinks would make you less nervous.”

He doesn't want to head down that road. But a little liquid nourishment takes him a long way. He wows the crowd. He loves his new celebrity.

“You really think that this is going to work.”

“I don't give a damn if this is going to work. It's working for me now! I am the hottest thing in Atlanta!”

“Big fish in a small pond.”

“Make fun of me all you want. No one can get in my way.”

“Does your husband know how you feel?”

“Daniel is such a pawn”

“What about Bill? He could lose all his money.”

“The idea is stupid. But it's great for drawing everyone's attention.”

“It's all hype. Why isn't Bill suspicious?”

“All Bill can smell is green!”

“You haven't slept with him.”

“You don't think my convincing skills are that good, Antoine. The Lord gave me one skill. And I was meant to use it.”

He jumps as she slides her hand down his pants.

“One little one for the road before we get things started.”

Her body is just as solid as when she was eighteen. She doesn't spend all her spare time in the gym for nothing.

“I could never get a real job. Not while there are so many eligible men out there.”

“I don't know how long Daniel is going to let me stay in the guest room.”

“You let me worry about that. We're going to be moving into a new place.”

Her low-cut dress attracts his attention. He begins to caress her breasts.

“These are real?”

“None of me is real!”

“You have the greatest ass.”

He slides her dress up her legs. Her thong hugs her tight body. As he pulls it off, he notices the tan lines.

“I thought you hated the sun.”

“Get down there, and use your tongue for more than wagging the bull shit.”

As she lies back on the couch, he buries himself in a pile of fabric. This house has never seen a greater art.

Her sighs turn into wails. The walls quake with her ecstasy. If not for the hubbub everywhere else in the house, they might have been discovered.

As she draws him inside of her, she breathes deeply to sound the core of her being. This is about more than something physical. She is challenging the order of the universe, the harmony of the stars.

“We’re surely going to go to hell for this!”

“I’ll buy my way out of that one. I hear that St. Peter has his weaknesses. Where do you think he really was when he denied his lord?”

“You are a wicked little vixen.”

“I only wish that you had a little more staying power. Antoine, don’t let me be denied.”

“I’m doing all that I can. You love to suck the life out of your men.”

“Don’t try to transform me into some kind of mythical succubus just because you can’t retain your vigor.”

Laurène appears all freshly made up for the event. It is more than a party. It is a plea to heaven.

“I’ve got a bit of a hangover. Bill, get me a drink.”

They have rented a small theater. They have sold tickets. Lights are flashing. Laurène is part of the new Atlanta royalty.

“If you’re the queen, does that make Daniel your king.”

“I rule alone. He worships me.”

“There will be no blood for this procedure. There are no dangers to the patient. That is why we don’t need to work in hospital. The conditions are just right here.”

Behind the glaring lights, they are a pack of hyenas let loose in this dingy theater.

Daniel does his best to recall the sequence of colors. He can see the spectrum while everyone else stares in mid-air. He reaches into the ether to grab hold of something. This is the entry way.

The patient is lying down on a real operating table. He has been prepped as if this is a real operation. As Daniel gets closer to the man, he lets out the wildest yell.

“Laurène, you were better than that this morning. You should be up there!”

“Shut up, Antoine. I’m finished with you.”

The man collapses on the table. Daniel waves his hands in triumph.

“I have cured him.”

An actual physician is in attendance. He leaps to the stage and rushes to assist the man.

“They’ve killed him. They’ve removed his heart.”

Panic ensues. If not for the vigilant guards, there might have been a riot.

“Are they going to arrest Daniel?”

“He did nothing.”

“But that doctor said that he heart had been removed.”

“That never happened.”

“But the patient died.”

“Laurène, everything is going to be OK. The man has been take to a hospital for observation. Daniel may have saved his life.”

It is a tense couple of days as they await the news. Everything depends on the patient’s recovery.

“I have to get out of Atlanta. I need a rest.”

With those words, Laurène takes her leave.

“She couldn’t stay here with me.”

“Daniel, they have been hounding her. Let her find some peace.”

Bill and Daniel both wait at the hospital. Their futures are tied up in the operation's success.

"I can assure you that your procedure had nothing to do with his death. The man was looking for hope. A miracle. There was nothing that anyone could have done. You were both friends to him in his final days."

The papers are not so even in their criticism. Bill is depicted as scoundrel who has bilked the public out of its money. And Daniel is shown to be a greedy type who would stop at nothing to make his fortune.

"He has made his career posing as an artist. He lures wealth women to leave their husbands. And he abandons all of them when their money runs out."

"Next thing, they'll accuse me of murdering my clients."

"You can't listen to TV! They just are trying to boost their ratings with another high-tech lynching!"

"What am I going to do?"

"You could teach art."

"I think that we are both going to spend some time in jail."

"I've got lawyers."

Bill disappears in the dark, dark night. He leaves Daniel to get hung out to dry. Laurène does not return from her long-needed vacation.

"I could start my career as an abstract artist."

"There's no market for that. You should have stuck to portraits."

He remembers the portrait that he did of Laurène. He fell in love with its muted colors and promise of time. Now, he is overwhelmed with a somber image.

"Where are you from, my dear?"

"Originally, my family was from New Orleans. We are descendants of French nobility. My father was a painter. Abstract expressionist. He was a wild man with a canvas."

"You don't say. His fire has rubbed off on you. What is your name?"

"Laurène Besançon."

"You are as cute as a little butterfly that lilt from flower to flower."

"Think of her more as a Queen Bee."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"She is a woman with a past."

"We all have a past."

The art teacher stood at the head of the class.

"You have to learn about the fine breath that is evoked by color."

"I thought that painting is about passion."

"Don't painters have sex with their models?"

"Must be fun."

"I'm a painter. I'm a painter."

"Settle down class!"

"I can understand why someone would like to be a painter. But why would anyone want to teach art class?"

"It's a constant source of income."

“Didn’t you ever want to be a famous painter?”

“Didn’t you ever have romantic dreams?”

“This is a real drag working here.”

“Do you ever feel that you’re not a real man?”

“I live off the excitement of all of you learning about the magic of art.”

“My father says that art serves no useful purpose. He says that they are going to stop giving tax money to art teachers.”

“Are you going to have to get another job?”

“Have you ever seen those guys on the side of the road who will paint you?”

“Could you do that, Mr. Daniels?”

“Is that a fun life? You could be outside all the time.”

“What about when it rains?”

“Some men never learn when to come in out of the rain.”

“What do they call those men?”

“Losers?”

“They are called seers! Prophets. You have to know the rain to appreciate the sun.”

“I want to be an artist. I want the girls to like me.”

“No one really loves an artist. And he loves no one!”

“Is that true?”