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The Purple Shadow

Written by Christopher Bowden

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The Purple Shadow

Christopher Bowden

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One

Colin Mallory was biding his time. He was early, for once, and took advantage with a book on a bench in the garden of the Musée Carnavalet. It was not far from where he needed to be and he was enjoying the relaxed formality of the surroundings. He missed Bryony, of course, but they spoke on the phone during gaps in her filming schedule, exchanged messages, swapped photographs. They were due to meet in London when shooting was over and they could reclaim their Dalston flat, sub-let when they thought that time in Paris with the Enigma Theatre Company would be longer than it was. Despite the popularity of the Enigma's English-language productions of Shakespeare at the Théâtre Marivaux, they could not pay their way. The little theatre near the Gare du Nord was dark now and Colin had the days to himself.

He did not resent that the Enigma's director, Ken Westow, had pulled strings to get Bryony the job with Hungerford Films at short notice. He was content to wander, to explore the city while he had the chance, returning each evening to the tiny *chambre*

de bonne that crouched beneath the roof of a building in Belleville.

The buzzing of his phone told him it was time to make a move. He worked round a knot of Japanese tourists clicking furiously at the statue of winged Victory, nipped along the arcade and left the museum through a room adorned with historic street signs. He made for the Place des Vosges. He was meeting Paul Barnard at the Galerie Marion Ducasse, though he wasn't quite sure why. It had been Paul's idea, suggested as they were leaving Le Procope last night. The meal had been excellent but Colin's memory of the conversation was hazy.

Paul, a director of Cork Street gallery Bainbridge and Murray, was in Paris to make arrangements for an exhibition of paintings by Lucy Potter following her successful show in London some months earlier. He was also the partner of Colin's older sister Clare, a barrister who combined disapproval of her brother's precarious profession and his leisurely approach to finding work with a sneaking regard for his talent.

The Galerie Marion Ducasse occupied double-fronted premises in one of the arcades. Colin approached with some diffidence, intimidated by the understated elegance and assertive restraint of the frontage. He affected a nonchalant air, ambling past the windows and glancing through them with studied indifference. On the bright white walls, a few large abstracts, perhaps by a follower of Jackson Pollock; in the intervening space, several bronze figures of animals that might have been

goats or possibly antelope of a species rarely seen in the Place des Vosges. Either way, there was no sign of Paul. Were they supposed to be meeting inside or out?

At his fourth pass of the gallery, the girl at the desk looked up from her screen and smiled. Then a door at the back opened and Paul, tanned and relaxed in his trademark linen suit, appeared behind a woman embodying the chic, the quiet authority, of the gallery itself. Paul beckoned him in and introduced Madame Ducasse. She greeted him in fluent mid-Atlantic and said she had much enjoyed his performance as the King of Navarre in the Enigma's production of *Love's Labour's Lost*. And the Princess of France was played by his friend Bryony? Such a charming girl. What a pity she was not in Paris at the moment. But perhaps he and Paul would do her the honour of coming to dinner that evening at her apartment in the rue du Chardonneret. It was only a few minutes' walk from the gallery.

The rue du Chardonneret! Colin knew it from his wanderings through the Marais on his way to and from the room in Belleville. He had no fixed route or timetable, no specific destination. He went where his feet led him, guided by sights and sounds along the way, taking pleasure in spontaneity and in the unexpected. It was a solitary activity but it had to be, to wander without distraction, without suffering the inevitable compromise of companionship.

He did not take pictures, did not take notes, wanting to live the moment, to experience the city at first

hand, to savour details missed by people in a hurry. The Medusa lurking at the base of a well in the middle of a quiet square; the knocker in the shape of two seahorses on a door bearing swags of wooden fruit; the play of light and shade on the side of a church as gently swaying plane trees filtered the morning sun; the curve of a banister in a gloomy porch; the statue of Mercury seen through railings on the top of a garden wall; the one-eyed accordion-player with a rabbit in a basket; the flame-haired woman walking five snuffling pugs, each on a lead of a different colour. He knew he would remember them, where he had seen them, long after he had left Paris and gone back home.

The rue du Chardonneret was a narrow street of seventeenth-century houses. A little austere and forbidding at first sight but, as Colin pointed out to Paul in the dwindling daylight, the pallid stonework was enlivened – his word – by balconies, rustication and elaborate carving. Madame Ducasse had an apartment at number nine. The entrance to the building was set in an archway, topped by a classical pediment. She buzzed them through high double-doors that gave onto a cobbled courtyard. A staircase to the right wound up to the first floor and the warm rectangle of light that framed Madame Ducasse. Her hair shone yellow-gold.

“Please. Call me Marion.”

She led them to a comfortable sitting room with tall windows that faced the street and the small park opposite. While she headed to the kitchen and her unseen assistant, Colin and Paul roamed with white

wine and canapés, looking at pictures, furniture, ornaments. Etchings by Matisse and Picasso vied with caricatures by Gillray and Daumier and some Sonia Delaunay fabric designs, Braque engravings were nudging a still life by Chardin, a pair of Oriental vases flanked a Giacometti stick man. All this and much more identified by Paul, who declared the eclectic arrangement inspired. Colin found it hard to take in; he sank to a chair and stared at the painting above the marble fireplace.

It was the portrait of a woman in her mid-twenties, perhaps. He guessed from her dress, the style of her hair, that it was painted in the 1930s. She too was sitting in a chair in front of a fireplace, hands loosely knitted in her lap, a ring glinting on one finger. She was looking directly at him with a knowing smile and a hint of complicity. Or so it seemed. The effect was disconcerting.

“Paul. Have you seen this one?”

“Good Lord,” he said, negotiating his way between two tables shaped like kidneys, “it looks like a late Vuillard, though smaller than others I’ve come across.”

“Late who?”

“Vuillard. Édouard Vuillard. Probably best known for interiors and domestic scenes. He focussed mainly on portraits in his last twenty years or so. He died during the war.”

“Do you notice anything about it?”

Paul took a careful step back and frowned. He said nothing for a while and then,

“The fireplace in the picture looks like this one. There are some of the same things on it. And the fire screen to her right is surely the one that’s here now.” He was pointing to an oval screen on a tripod base. Within its elaborate gilt frame an embroidered bird of paradise lurked among leaves and flowers with a sharp beak and a malevolent expression that left the woman in the picture unmoved.

“You mean it was painted in this room.”

“Probably in the artist’s studio in its final form but she certainly seems to have sat for it here.”

“I wonder who she is.”

They were called in to dinner and conversation turned to other matters. Madame Ducasse, they learned, had worked in galleries in Montpellier, Toronto, New York, and Boston. She was delighted to discover that Colin had been at Harvard and reminisced about the hours spent in Cambridge bookshops. Then, in the sitting room over coffee and Armagnac, Paul put the question that had been left hanging.

“She’s my Great-aunt Sylvie,” said Marion. “Sylvie Charlot. As she was in about 1935 or ’36, I think. Certainly before the war. She died only a few years ago at the age of a hundred and something. She put her longevity down to cigarettes and red wine. I inherited the picture along with the apartment. She lived here all her life.”

“So you knew the picture long before it passed to you,” said Colin.

“No. There was a mirror over the fireplace during her lifetime. At least, in all the years that I came here. The painting was found by some workmen behind a false wall in the cupboard you passed in the hall. It was wrapped in a blanket and an old pair of curtains.”

“Why was it hidden?” asked Paul. “It’s a really good picture.”

“It was painted in happier times. It held too many memories, I suppose. A long while ago now.”

The room went quiet. Legs were crossed and uncrossed, Armagnac sipped, coffee slurped. It was Colin who broke the silence.

“The fireplace in the picture. And the screen.”

“Yes. And the miniatures you see hanging beside the fireplace. She was in this room, roughly where I am sitting now.”

Exactly where you’re sitting now, thought Paul. And the resemblance is striking, though Sylvie looks a good deal more cheerful.

“I was saying to Colin that it looked a bit like one of Vuillard’s late portraits, though I haven’t spotted a signature. There’s a lot of detail – flowers, pictures, objects – showing Sylvie in her surroundings.”

“In her home,” said Madame Ducasse distantly. “But, yes, quite relaxed and informal. Vuillard was my theory too but I have found no reference in his catalogue raisonné or anywhere else to a portrait of Sylvie Charlot and none of my contacts in the art world was aware of its existence. I even went to the Institut de France to look at his journal for the years when the picture

must have been painted. It gives a lot of information about the process of making his paintings and what he thought about his clients but the journal is silent about this one.”

“Vuillard made extensive preliminary drawings and sketches and often took photographs too,” said Paul. “Have none of these turned up?”

“No. Which may cast further doubt on Vuillard as the painter but there is nothing to suggest any other artist either.”

A gentle knock on the door. It opened a crack to reveal the pink face of the girl who had spent most of the evening in the kitchen.

“Do excuse me,” said Madame Ducasse. “I must find my bag.”

As two pairs of heels sounded down the corridor, Paul scrambled to his feet and eased the door shut.

“Quick. Take a photograph of the picture while I keep guard.”

Colin pulled out his phone and took several. They slid back to their places and reached for their glasses just as the handle of the door was beginning to turn.

They stepped into the chill of the rue du Chardonneret and crossed the road. Damp cobbles gleamed in the subdued light of a lantern. It was suspended from a bracket on the building next to number nine. As Colin looked up at the tall windows of the room they had just left, the curtains of one of them appeared to part. A figure was staring directly at them.

“Who’s that there?”

“Who’s that where?” said Paul.

There was no one at the window and the curtains were closed.

“It must have been Madame.”

“Then she’s grown a bit in the last few minutes,” said Colin. “Perhaps it was the elusive Monsieur Ducasse.”

“I believe he died some years ago. Fancy a quick one?”

In the bar of Le Singe Fou, they looked at the photographs on Colin’s phone. Some focussed on details, others showed the picture as a whole.

“Still no sign of a signature,” said Paul.

“The stain is a bit odd,” said Colin. “It didn’t seem so prominent in the room.” He was pointing at a damson-coloured mark on the rug in front of the fireplace. “It’s like a bruise.”

“I don’t think it’s a stain. But it is odd, almost random.”

“Maybe it’s a shadow.”

“Of what? There’s nothing there.”

“Of something outside the picture.”

“I can’t see much point. Unless, of course, the original painting was bigger and you could see what was casting the shadow.”

“Cut down, you mean. Why would anyone do that?”

Two

The day was pale but not entirely grey. Here and there, the high cloud had thinned to reveal a lining of duck-egg blue. Still pretty tentative, thought Colin, but a reasonable prospect of some sun later.

He was sitting on a bench in an allée of plane trees in the Jardin des Plantes. He took a swig from a bottle of water and followed the halting progress across the grass of a pair of crows uninhibited by requests to keep off the *pelouses fragiles*. He was having a rest before resuming his meandering route to the Panthéon by way of the rue Mouffetard. Perhaps he should not have made that detour via the Île St-Louis for the sake of a rhubarb sorbet.

Beside him, his bag, his book, and the bottle-green velvet jacket he wore every day, a near-identical replacement for the one he had bought in a Boston thrift store and had to leave behind in Sanderling, at The Red House. He was haunted, even now, by memories of the place and what had happened there. With Bryony away, there was no one to cling to, to

comfort him, when he woke breathless and sweating in the early hours.

As he had begun to think about making a move, a figure pounded past at speed and stopped abruptly a little way beyond the bench. It turned and said,

“You’re Colin. The English actor.”

“Er...”

“You came to the gallery last week with Monsieur Barnard.”

“Yes. I did. Yes.”

“May I?”

It was, he now realised, the girl who had smiled at him through the window. She was barely recognisable with her shoulder-length brown hair drawn back tightly into a ponytail and clamped by headphones.

“Please do,” he said, sliding along the bench and pulling his jacket towards him. “Good to see you again.”

She took off the headphones and hair tie, shook her hair free, and sat down next to him.

“I’m Véronique,” she said, amused by Colin’s discomfort. “I think you are a flâneur when you are not acting. But I do not see your lobster.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It is said that the writer Gérard de Nerval used to take his pet lobster for a walk in the gardens of the Palais Royal. On the end of a blue silk ribbon.”

“Progress must have been slow. Mine escaped from his tank and headed for the nearest Métro station before I could stop him.”

Véronique smiled that smile and said,

“Did you have a good dinner with Madame Ducasse the other night?”

“We did. No lobster, I’m afraid, but I can recommend the timbale of crab we had as a starter. I think we made a mistake afterwards, though, by asking about the picture, the portrait of her great-aunt that’s above the fireplace.”

“I know the picture. Marion found it in a cupboard after she moved to the apartment from the little flat she had in Passy. But why should asking about it have been a mistake?”

“It seems that the portrait had been hidden for years. Madame Ducasse said it had been painted in happier times but did not explain what made them less happy or why it should have led to the picture being put away. She just said something about the memories it held.”

“Marion has said nothing to me about the history of the painting but I have not asked.”

“Whatever it was that happened, the picture was obviously not destroyed. In fact, it seems to have been well wrapped up to ensure it was not damaged. Anyway, Madame Ducasse was obviously reluctant to say more and it did not seem right to press her. We were her guests and she hardly knows us.”

He hesitated for a moment and then said,

“But it would be nice to know a bit about the painting and why it was hidden away for so long. No one even seems sure who painted it.” He had felt an odd sense of connection with Sylvie when he had looked at her above the fireplace, almost as if she were looking

at him, appealing to him, had something she needed to say. He had not mentioned the feeling to Paul but it had stayed with him. And what if they were right that the picture was larger once, had been cut down to remove something or conceal it? He wanted to find out more.

“I don’t suppose there’s anyone else who can help,” said Véronique. “The people Sylvie knew must have died a long time ago. She was in the fashion world, I believe.”

“And Madame Ducasse is her only living relative.”

“As far as I know. I don’t think she married.”

Véronique shifted on the bench and looked thoughtful. A glint of sunlight flashed off the roof of a glasshouse on the other side of the garden.

“There *is* Madame Martin. She was like a housekeeper in Sylvie’s last years. I met her when she was helping Marion to sort out the apartment.”

“But the picture was painted in the mid-1930s and surely hidden long before Madame Martin was on the scene.”

“She may know something of Sylvie’s past and she still lives in the Marais. I pass her sometimes. Always sitting by herself at the same table in the same café with a cigarette and a *petit blanc sec*.”

“It’s putting you to some trouble.”

“It’s no trouble just asking a few questions. How will I keep in touch with you?”

Colin trudged up the last few flights to the room on the seventh floor. From behind closed doors, the blare of a television, the scolding of a child, the repetition

of scales on a piano that needed tuning. As he made the final turn on the narrow staircase, he gripped the banister to catch his breath before stabbing the lock with his key and pushing into the room. He sank to the edge of the unmade bed that occupied much of the room and looked at his phone. A long message from Paul that he would come back to at a better moment. And a couple of photographs of Bryony posing with the stars of the film, her long blonde hair lost beneath a powdered wig. She looked happy.

He should have called a halt at the Panthéon. But the temptation to go that little bit further had proved too hard to resist. The next thing he knew he was past the Luxembourg gardens and heading for Montparnasse. He had beer and a sandwich in a bar at the station and caught the Métro most of the way back. Cheating, perhaps, for a flâneur but he did not feel too guilty in view of the distance he had walked. Emerging from Couronnes station, on the boulevard de Belleville, he retrieved an orange as discreetly as he could from the detritus of that day's market and pressed it into the pocket of his jacket.

He eased himself up and looked out of the window. It was a different world at this height. The sights and sounds of the street were lost far below. His view was dormers and balconies, shutters and skylights, chimneys and blank walls. Even these were becoming indistinct as the blue light of evening gave way to night.

He wondered whether it had been wise to mention the picture to Véronique or give her his number. The

history of the painting was none of his business and he would be back in London before long. For all he knew, she would tell Madame Ducasse that he had been asking. He did not want to make things awkward for Paul, who would still be working with her on the Lucy Potter exhibition. But there was something about the portrait of Sylvie Charlot, something compelling, that was driving him on. He could not let go.

He turned back into the room and put out the overhead light. He kicked off his shoes and lay on the bed, staring at the shadows cast by the lamp perched on a pile of books beside him. Or, rather, cast by the objects round the room in the way of the light it gave out. A shadow, Paul had declared the other night in *Le Singe Fou*, was simply an absence of light. It was not real, had no existence in its own right. Shadows emphasised the presence of the objects casting them, gave depth and definition while remaining flat and two-dimensional themselves.

Easy to say, thought Colin. The shadows he saw thrown against walls and ceiling had an existence of their own, turning familiar objects into caricatures, grotesque silhouettes, some hideously foreshortened, others unnaturally elongated. Or so it seemed. It was probably just the product of an over-active imagination, no more than seeing faces in the fire or picking out shapes in the clouds. If he pushed the switch, they would be gone.

Three

Colin bought a loaf from the *boulangerie* just above the Parc de Belleville and picked at it as he made his way down the slope. He had designated the day as one of relative rest, a chance to catch up on the book he invariably carried with him but rarely got round to reading. From his seat in the park he had a panoramic view of Paris, steely grey at this hour but in the dying moments of a fine day the whole city seemed bathed in warm apricot light.

He brushed the crumbs from his trousers and removed the book from his bag. Then he remembered the message on his phone. Paul had printed the photographs of the painting and crawled over them – at length and in detail, apparently. He had not found a signature but still thought it could be a late work by Vuillard. He'd had no more luck than Madame Ducasse in finding any mention in the reference books or on-line. He would ask around and let Colin know how he got on.

Sylvie herself was enjoying the attention, Paul

said. Her smile seemed to have become broader, her expression more knowing, almost mischievous, as if she were playing a game. And that shadow on the rug. In close-up, the purple fragmented, broke down into small dots of colour of varying intensity so that the shadow was more subtly modulated than at first appeared. The only thing was, its position in the photographs wasn't quite as he remembered from the painting; the shadow seemed a slightly different size and shape and a bit closer to Sylvie. But he couldn't be sure and he'd look at the photographs again in a few days.

Colin read the message again and wondered if he should have a word with Clare. Paul had clearly been overworking, not that she was a model of restraint in that department herself.

He broke off a twist of bread, slipped it into his mouth, and picked up his book. Just as he found his place, his phone began to chirp with the insistence of a demented cricket. It was Véronique.

"I have spoken to Madame Martin."

"Already?" he said, chewing hard.

"I saw her this morning when I was coming back from the apartment. Marion sent me there to fetch some papers she had left behind."

"Did you learn anything of interest?"

"Yes but I cannot talk now. I am at my desk and there are customers. Can you meet me at five o'clock in the Place des Vosges? By the statue of Louis XIII."

Colin strolled round the statue several times, glancing

in the direction of the gallery on each circuit. Mounted on horseback and set on a plinth, the king looked way over his head to the other side of the square, indifferent to what took place below. Suddenly, Véronique skittered across the road. She walked demurely towards the statue and kissed Colin on both cheeks. Before he could decide whether to reciprocate she had led him to a bench and removed a small notebook from her bag. For a few moments she said nothing, frowning as she stared at the squared paper as if struggling to understand the words scrawled on it. Then she said,

“I did not have time for a long conversation with Madame Martin. I also had to approach the subject slowly, work my way towards it. I pretended that our meeting was just by chance and that it gave me an opportunity to pose a question about the painting raised by a visitor to Madame Ducasse’s apartment. Naturally, she replied that Marion herself was the best person to ask but I said that you were a little embarrassed and thought it would be impolite to be too direct. I hope that you do not mind.”

“Not at all. Did she know anything about the picture?”

“It was not on the wall while she worked for Sylvie and was not found for some time afterwards. She has seen it, though, because Marion showed it to her when she visited the apartment. She said that Sylvie mentioned a painting – a portrait – several times towards the end of her life and that it caused her some agitation. By then, it was hard to follow what Sylvie was saying.

If she meant the picture that had been hidden, she did not say so or tell anyone where it was.”

“Madame Ducasse obviously has some idea of its history, though I’m not clear how if it was not found until after Sylvie died.”

“Whatever it is, Madame Martin does not know it or did not want to tell me. But she did say that Sylvie started to talk about a man over and over again while repeating the word ‘*Amour*’ and trying to point.”

“Did he have a name?”

“Not one that Madame Martin could make out. Perhaps you will find out more.”

“Me?”

“She said she would like to meet you. It seems that this mysterious man was an English actor too.”