Dove Rengger-Thorpe, "The Smiling Girl"

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THE SMILING GIRL

In Paris there are gusts of hot wind and smells of sewage in intermittent bursts. Motorcycles roar through the streets at night and the sound floats up through the window of my hotel room, where I lie wrapped up in thick white sheets. An old man rides past on a bicycle with a cane basket on the front. People eat baguettes wrapped in tiny squares of white paper as they walk, tearing off small chunks of bread. There is no toast for breakfast. Instead there are cold boiled eggs, croissants, little crusty loaves. Butter and jam. Milky coffee.

The water of the Seine is murky, almost bottle green, but people wander by the banks, which are paved; they dance, the lights glow and the Notre Dame crouches in the middle of the river. There are thirty-two bridges which cross the Seine. A small version of the Statue of Liberty rests on an island almost underneath the Eiffel Tower. The Place de la Concorde, where the guillotine was set up, where Marie Antoinette was beheaded, where the blood must have run into the water, is home to a children's park and a prettier version of the London Eye, set up for the millennium celebrations. The wheel, blazing with lights against the old stone, disrupts the alignment of the arch of the Louvre with the Arc de Triomphe. Children scream with pleasure.

"No Flash Photography" all the signs said, when I went to see the smiling woman at the Louvre, and walked down through the glass pyramid, still tasting the city in the air- wide-eyed. I looked around, shook my head and finally found the queue. The children in front of me spoke rapid fire French. The man behind was playing with his chubby toddler. "Oui, oui, oui!" he yelled into the side of his child's neck. The child shrieked and chuckled and ran a few staggered steps. I stood in the middle of it all, listening hard and understanding little. Even my smiles seemed meaningless. When I got to the head of the queue I pushed my money across, through the slit in the plastic. My ticket shot out and the lady looked over my shoulder at the next person, but I opened my mouth slowly, like a fish, and asked "Is the Mona Lisa open today?"

"Yes. Oui," said the woman, exhausted in her glass case like a stick insect caught on a pin.

Even her nod was weary. On the way up the stairs I knew why. Like a trail of ants we were all heading for the same thing: just a glimpse. The fleshy angels were passed by without a glance, and the Renaissance women rolled their eyes while the men drew their last breaths in the dust. They didn’t go quietly. And neither did we.
"The thing about the Renaissance is that the art is just so dynamic," said an American woman to her friends as they jettisoned past on the slipstream to the smiling woman.

Her accent was so strident it almost wore boots. If I'd had someone to talk to I would have been worried about my own accent.

As I drew closer, through hall after hall of dark shadows lurking at the feet of men, the crowd grew thicker and I entered another larger hall, and there, at the end of the room was a knot of people. And above us all was the smiling woman. Everyone had told me that it was going to be much smaller than I would have thought, so of course it was much larger than I had expected.

She was holding us off with a red velvet rope, a sheet of glass and that slightly turned shoulder, the thin smile. I stood at the back and breathed slowly. In and out. In and out. A smile settled on my cheeks. I was here. And then, two seconds after I breathed in, lights flashed and bulbs popped around and around her head. "No Flash Photography." No wonder she was in glass, I thought, and a tear slipped down my cheek. I stood very still and looked closer. The people with video cameras were taking it all home. The lightning flashed around her head, and we smiled at each other. The well-dressed Japanese with matchbox cameras moved closer. We all moved in an eddy, caught in the thrall of the smiling woman.

Her smile seemed glued on, the line of her nose disdainful. She looked me in the eye while I pushed with the crowd, and the flashes clicked like strobe lights. My hand crept into my bag until it rested on the cloth of my camera case. Like everyone else, I wanted to take her home. I had come this far. I looked her in the eye, and she just kept smiling. I left the room with her smile caught in my eyes like sunspots. Were her arms folded, or did it just seem that way?

At the end of the next hall Goya's unknown woman stood alone, unattended.

I'm tiptoeing back from my vigil with Goya, silent as a library inside, when the man interrupts me: "Excusez-moi, quelle heure est-il?" I am shocked, and stare at him dumbfounded. He has asked me a question. And he is French and I am not. Quelle is something to do with time, and I reach into my bag, my eyes still on his face, meaning to show him my watch when I remember that I have left it on Australian time and I have been converting to English time. I look down at the digital watch face, a picture of Astro on the side. The watch plays a recorded message when you hit a button. There is a message from my boyfriend on there, and I have carried it half way around the world in this watch. The watch says two-forty five, and I count back ten hours. A quarter to
five, and I am still standing there and he is still standing there, so I make a stab for it and say "il est quart cinq." I know this isn't right, but I say it with my best accent anyway.

"That's a good accent," he says in an American voice, "Are you Australian?"

I start laughing. I have been caught out, and now I am embarrassed. It's a strange thing to meet this man, the only English speaker I have met on this short tour-guided trip to France, and instead of being strangers we are suddenly two friends. He is an art critic from New York and speaks fluent Spanish and French. He asks me what I do, and I explain that I am in the process of working on a PhD, and that I have just been to a conference in Liverpool.

"What's your thesis?" he asks, and I am surprised again.

I tell him that it involves fictional auto slash biography, and that I am unsure of it because it can be such dangerous ground. He smiles, and when he does he gets wrinkles around his eyes.

"Just put 'meta' in the title."

He pronounces "meta" so that it rhymes with "data," and I don't know what he means.

"What?" I say.

"Metafiction," he replies.

We wander up the hall and look at a huge oil painting by Artemisia Gentileschi's father, and he points out the long second toes of the ancient Greek and Roman women. He asks me to dinner, and I hesitate, thinking of boats on the Seine, bright with lanterns, but my grandmother is outside, waiting in the stone courtyard. When we part he heads deeper into the bowels of the building, gliding over the marble floors.

It isn't until I get to the escalators, which are jammed with people, that I notice that the museum is closing, and with a start I realise that I have given him the wrong time. I have not been calculating the hours time difference between France and England. It is nearly six. Nan is frantic outside, and we rush across the dusty gravel of the park towards the Place de la Concorde, where the tour bus is waiting, and the dark settles.