

My Van Gogh

a novel





Published by the Bay Owl Press, 2020
an imprint of the Perera-Hussein Publishing House
www.pererahussein.com

ISBN: 978-955-1723-47-7

Bay Owl
P R E S S

First published in 2019 by ARDEN – Australian Scholarly Publishing Ltd.

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the Perera-Hussein Publishing House grows trees in Puttalam,
Sri Lanka's semi-arid zone.

*For Alex,
my soulmate*



*Strange, is it not? That of the myriads who
Before us pass'd the darkness through
Not one returns to tell us of the road,
Which to discover we must travel too.*

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám



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Chapter One

A STARRY NIGHT

Shannon jolted awake at an ungodly hour. A party was in full swing upstairs. A kick drum was throbbing through the ceiling. Thud-thud. It went on and on, escalating in tempo and volume. A heart in distress, pumping blood at a dangerous rate. A blast of noise, stamping feet, riotous laughter.

Shannon knew that any effort to get back to sleep would be futile. This made him sad; that he'd not been invited to the bash upstairs made him sadder still. Excruciatingly sad. He was probably the only one uninvited in the block. He tried to root out this sadness, but it thrust further and deeper. He grew panicky, anticipating what would surely follow. He sought escape. He struggled to raise his head, but it crashed and fell back – as if he were locked up in a box. He lay rigid. If I could turn myself into a log, he thought, or something inanimate like that. Pulsing heart stilled, anxious mind quietened, soul abandoned. Bled out. Pulsed out. But the kick drum pounded. Thud. Thud-thud! Thud.

They were coming for him, charging down the stairs. He was petrified, expecting to be pulled out of bed and hurled out of the window. He saw himself hurtling down and hitting the ground. Thud. Thud-thud. Dad and Guy scooping him up, carrying him back home. Maman, he mourned, Maman. His throat was parched, stuffed with dust; he had to get at some water. His arm lay immobile. He had to take a pill. He was entombed in this box, suffocating. And then he saw it coming for him – a great mass of fire to mow him down. He flattened into the bed. But monstrously it lurched. It knew where he was hiding. He was hot, cold. He was bathed in sweat.

Suddenly galvanized, Shannon stumbled out of the room, down the corridor into the lift, and out of the building. He slid down on the sidewalk, filling his lungs with gulps of cold air. The world gyrated dizzily in the indistinct yellow of road lamps. The road was deserted. A few cars passed, as if they were driving themselves. A tram chugged along, all lit up with no one inside. A glow worm tunnel. Sluggishly, Shannon grew back into his body and mind. He pulled himself up. Drawing up his hood and pocketing his hands in his tracksuit pants, he walked, head down, without direction.

When he found himself again, he was loitering in the unknown depths of a wilderness. Had he jumped over a fence? High above, the arms of giant trees entangled the silver-black sky. He made out the baggy shapes of fruit bats. A twig snapped underfoot. Disturbed, the bats circled, muffled shapes. There was silence everywhere, a cavernous silence but for bat wings brushing the air.

He saw the outline of a bench and slumped on to it. Listlessly, he retreated into a zone of inaction. A lonely vignette drifted around him. There was his mother, shimmering in the distance, in a gentle patch of bluish light. He closed his eyes. She drew a blanket around him. She had brought him a basket of glittering stars. She cupped his face with hands that were warm and fresh, as if she'd just stepped out of the shower. He drew up his knees and turned on to his side. He was awake in the dream, trailing the edge, breathing the damp eucalypt smell. He snuggled closer into the arms that held him. But there were voices rising and crumbling all around him, so close he could touch them. The splintering of glass. Shards of glass, their points brilliant in the moonlight. He plunged into a snagged nightmare of love and desertion.

Day broke, swathed in mist. Shannon stretched in slow motion and opened his eyes. For a moment, the world was made anew just for him. Vague shapes were stirring into life, suffused in muted grey. Up in the heavens, a bird heralded dawn; another joined in, then another. Soon, a bird symphony surged in the heart of the forest, chirping and warbling, raucous and laughing. As if synchronized with this, the sky lightened, a diamond pierced a dewdrop, and a ladybug made a red spot on Shannon's chest. Frozen and immobile, a small round shape. Shannon blew into his icy palms and made a cave over the insect, until it warmed up and began to dance. Round and round it went. Shannon dislodged it carefully, and placed it on the wooden seat. It disappeared, following a wavy uncharted path. He felt a oneness with the little traveller and waited for

its return. It was gone. He tried to sit up but felt shaky from the trauma of the night. He bent over sideways, searching under the bench. It was then that he noticed the crumpled blanket lying on the ground. He touched it, wondering how it had got there. In the faint blue light flowing from that earlier life, he traced on it a scatter of stars. He sat up, finally, rolled up the blanket and lumped it on the bench. It required so much effort. He clasped his arms around his chilled body and hunched his head between his shoulders, a hooded brooding bird.

A soggy apparition materialized in the receding mist. She approached his bench and picked up the threadbare blanket with swollen arthritic hands. She pulled it around her shoulders. 'Kept you warm, d'it? Go home, son. This is no place for you,' she mumbled. Her voice was gritty. She leaned towards him and pushed back his hair. Shannon stared into her furrowed face and saw endless sorrow in her eyes. A house burning to the ground. A lost son. The thud of earth on the coffin. Where were the words to comfort her?

'Where's my piano?' she asked suddenly, distracted. Shannon looked around confused. Piano. He was back with his mother, his head resting drowsily on her knee as her fingers flew over the keyboard. When he came to, the woman was already wandering away. Was Maman stumbling through life like this, lost and alone? How would he ever know? He could not bear it. He choked back a sob.



Gradually, Shannon heard the murmur of traffic and set off to walk towards it. A huge hot-air balloon was floating low over St Kilda Road. It bore the blown-up face of Vincent Van Gogh staring into the distance, as if he saw something that no one else did. Shannon stopped in his tracks. It nudged him to remember his uncompleted assignment on Van Gogh's art. As if it were a sign. What was it a sign of? Standing on the sidewalk, Shannon rolled his shoulders and rubbed his hands together to recharge his stiffened body. A warmly lit café beckoned from the opposite side of the road. The traffic was multiplying by the minute. He crossed over, veering dangerously between vehicles that beeped and swerved. Buoyed by the spring breeze, the balloon floated away, bumping in and out of air-pockets.

It was a brisk Monday morning at the Coffee Counter. Shannon stood just outside the glass doors. Inside was a flash of colour and movement. On the counter glistened a gold mesh bowl of big yellow lemons. To one side of the coffee machine, a pyramid of blue paper cups and plastic lids. And a line of people, pausing for their takeaway coffees on their way to work, a little rushed, anticipating what might lie ahead, a little distracted by the strange balloon. The aroma of freshly ground coffee drew Shannon. But the buzz of order-taking, customers and waiters rushing this way and that, the coffee machine grinding and banging and hissing and spitting, set his nerves on edge. He couldn't make himself move up to the counter. Instead, he leaned against the door frame, half-in half-out, and moped.

His eyes strayed to a large poster of a terrace café by the

Seine, taped to the wall behind the coffee counter. Perhaps it was there to distract impatient customers. But they were mostly immersed in their mobiles and, from habit, stepped up the line when the last person to place an order stepped out of it. At regular intervals, a cup of coffee changed hands from barista to customer. It was a painting come busily alive.

Next up was an ear-plugged young girl, who was fiddling with her sparkly blue mobile. It was difficult to ascertain her age. Her face looked mature but also innocent, as if the child she had been would not let go. She wore a red beanie.

‘Morning Sarah,’ the barista greeted her with a bright smile.

The girl looked up remotely. ‘Long black thanks.’

‘Sugar as usual?’ the barista asked, but got no reply.

A column of sunlight slanted in through the glass door-panes, turning dust motes into drifting flecks of gold. Meandering further in, it lit up the café tables in the poster and shimmered into the blue of the Seine. Shannon saw how the girl called Sarah lost herself in this filigree of light. Then, standing aside for her order, she returned to her mobile. Shannon’s mind conjured up the Paris dream she might have that night, perhaps. She’d re-live the play of light on the Seine. And on a long trek along its embankment, she’d make a new life that held no black tattoos nailed to her heart. Suddenly becoming aware that this fantasy was more about him than her, Shannon pressed his knuckles against his temples. An ache was spreading and deepening behind his eyes, tunnelling into his brain. Coffee. He needed a quick fix. No, not coffee.

Panic pill. But in the rush of last night, he'd forgotten to take it with him.

Plugging in earphones, Sarah was making her way out of the café when she brushed against Shannon.

'Sorry,' he mumbled nervously, pulling at a tuft of his hair, 'I wasn't looking where I was going. I'm so sorry.'

She looked surprised and seemed about to reply, but then turned abruptly to her mobile. He felt hotly embarrassed; perhaps she was reacting to the dishevelled look about him, the stubble on his face. She began to cross the road with her coffee in one hand, mobile in the other.

The yellow cab hit her almost before she realized it. It screeched to a halt. The cars behind sounded their horns and braked. A commotion erupted. The driver was out of the car in a flash. He dashed up to the girl and fell on his knees. He held her inert face between his palms. There was blood everywhere. It smudged against his white shirt. Shannon stood, transfixed and agitated, at the edge of it all. It was as if his own nightmare were claiming someone else's body. He began to bite his nails. The cuticles hurt, making him painfully aware that he was still alive.

The barista came running out. 'I know her, I know her,' she shouted, bending over the motionless figure and throwing out her arms wildly. 'She comes to the café all the time. Sarah, Sarah. Open your eyes.'

People pressed in. Voices shrilled and grated. 'Call an ambulance. Has anyone called the police?'