

## DRESSED, UNDRESSED

Reena is standing, but not sitting. Her hands are behind her, but not in front of her. She's keeping an eye on two rooms at once: the room containing Michiel Sweerts' *Clothing the Naked*, and the one with *Friedland 1807*, the pre-battle panorama of Napoleon's army by Meissonier.

Reena's eyes are brown? Blue? Something like that. Why describe her as beautiful? She's not. She's pre-aesthetic. Meaning there is no man or woman on earth who could say with complacency what it is that makes him or her go back a few steps to see her, or simply what makes him or her see her. What we need is a picture. A poet might have said her nose denoted two conflicting things: independence, and sensuality. And that her eyebrows bespoke female gallantry. But again, how does he or she come up with these conclusions from looking at her? Something in her face said "... ocean... radar." And something in her face and body together said "Trampled Grass." When you actually drive to the prairie. But I don't want to make her out to be more or less or other than human, or even human.

How is she? Young and ugly and beautiful. All-in-one vehicle. A sponge, a vacuum. Strands of not-so-blond hair escaping her barrette. A scouting eye would say... let's get some highlights. Not a wig no, no extensions, no, just a bit of color perhaps, and a brush. Same story with her skin... never seen a facial. Not yet. Not at this

point in her life. She knows about these matters, but she doesn't care, nor has she met anybody who made her care or made her want to encounter such improvements. Well, she somehow is required to put her hair out of the face. Because she works in public. And there are rules in a public. But her hair likes to slip. She's somewhat careless with her uniform too. Let me tell you about the uniforms. I was an arthandler for ten years, I rode around in a truck and we picked up paintings and took them around town. There was a guy named Eugene who worked on the trucks and who desired all the other truckers. He would talk filthy to you but very respectfully, which is very pleasant while you're working. Well now he works at the Met as a security guard and I stood up there with him one day while he was on duty. O, I looked at and felt his uniform. He told me what I had heard before, that they were designed by Armani before he was famous. You look at them and you see 'security guard,' 'mild,' 'gentle blue,' 'not very beautiful,' and then that little extra something that you can't put your finger on. Something snazzy but depressed... a Florida wind? "But you better go now because you're distracting me from looking at hot college guys."

Well, Reena stands there with a gold disc on each lapel like all the other guards. They look like toy soldiers, porters, bell-boys, 19th-century things, something snazzy but depressed, controlling yet puppet-like, serving. Serving the world, the museum, the artworks. Serving it up. Their own nothingness, wrapped in a funny costume. A bit scratchy too. All polyester. I love these guards! Waiting, waiting observing. Being magnificently bored. Bearing boredom. What a job! She is not happy, not sad, not nothing. Un-useful servant. You don't need to demonstrate business in that job, but deliver cool static. She is good at that. That's how she got the job in the first place, despite her young age. She has worked here at the museum now for the last seven months. Her sense of listening and her sense of observing with the eye have drastically improved. Super-sensitized, she's become a recording instrument. She knows

secrets, she's heard people talk, opinionate, despair: "I don't think she'd understand me"... "what adventures did you have since I last saw you"... "I'd like to live in t-shirt and undershorts"... "How long was I out there crying?"... "Do your best"... "I'm gonna kill this man"... "I love it"... "come on, we all know there will be war." Nobody ever talks in the way it would blow her brains out. Plus she has no desire to interfere with the flows that brought these streams of people, words. It all goes through her now, a surplus of subjectivities at her disposal. Reena, magnificently bored again, all day long.

She knows the grainy surveillance monitors are registering all her moves... sometimes she thought of herself as just a monitor staring back at the other monitors. A Russian man has just asked her where he could find "Broken Eggs," by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, but his party has already found it and is laughing with enthusiasm over this allegory of lost virginity they've come so far to see – the young woman, her basket of eggs upset on the barn floor, the young man with so much extra fabric in his pants, the eggs, the small boy trying to piece one of the eggs back together, the egg running between his fingers, and so forth.

Bernadette, another guard, is two galleries over, also watching her, registering all her moves, and having thoughts about her. Something's different about Reena today, she thinks. Something is making her seem to float there without actually leaving the ground. Bernadette has never exactly gotten to know Reena Spaulings, who always managed to slip into the changing room and punch out before Bernadette had even reached the bottom of the stairs. She wondered if there was something about her that the other guard disliked, or if Reena was just socially awkward. Reena hides behind her bangs. She might be shy or she might just have nothing interesting to say, no ideas. It's true that Reena projected the pre-talkie intelligence of a Lillian Gish or some other silent star. A burlesque intelligence. But Bernadette had ideas. She could manage a stimulating conversation with just about anyone, and liked to ask and

be asked penetrating, character-revealing questions. She had a prettier face and much better skin than Reena: you could see Reena's pores up close and pinkish imperfections in the sunlight. Bernadette was also at least an inch taller than the other guard, who compensated with high, non-regulation shoes. Maybe it was the shoes that seemed to be lifting her up on the spot.

The secret behind Bernadette's clear, radiant complexion were the herbal enemas she regularly gave herself. And once a year she went to a Haitian woman in the Bronx and had her colon deep-cleaned, a painful and laborious procedure but definitely worth the trouble. It's amazing what builds up in there. Rotten, clotted matter, and such a pile of it that, after her first visit, Bernadette had made a final decision never to look in that big plastic bowl again at the end of a session, because it disturbed her to know. But the next day her face was as light and clear as a reflection on water and she also felt a lot more positive towards life. Reena was awkward. Think of the waste that's built up in her over the years, the greenish brown muck coating her lower intestine, yards and pounds of it. The lode of waste encrusted into the walls of her colon. To this day Bernadette had never revealed her beauty secrets to anyone and probably never would. It was really nobody's business how she managed her special glow.

Rumors had a way of circulating among the guards. Amy insisted she'd spotted Reena going down on the drummer from *The Brown Recluse*, who was also a sometime male model, backstage at *Waste*. But it was pretty dark. Susan thought that Reena was into pills, and was maybe even dealing them on her lunch break and between shifts in *Impressionism*. That would explain a lot about Reena: her nice shoes, the impenetrable calm she wrapped herself in and that served as an invisible, newspaper-sized barrier between herself and the others, also probably the hovering trick she was performing today over by the *Gainsboroughs*. But Susan was always talking trash about the other girls and couldn't really back

this up. All Bernadette knew for sure were a few details she'd managed to spy on Reena's application form down in Personnel. 23 years old, which made her 24 now. Previous occupation: none. Internship experience at some DIY fashion label. Graduate of a middle-of-the-road arts program somewhere out of state. Other skills: music (guitar), ceramics, fencing, basic French. Arrested twice for disturbing the peace. She could be just about anybody.

Bernadette always made sure to stand on the outside edges of her feet, because another guard had warned her about fallen arches and spider veins. She'd even had special arches custom-made for her work shoes so she could stand for hours without getting very tired. She wondered what Reena looked like with no clothes on. Her breasts were probably cute in a medium sort of way, the kind you could cup in your hand and that wouldn't droop until she was about sixty. Her butt, on the other hand, looked loose on her frame, slightly floppy in her pants. Was she very hairy down there? It was hard to imagine but you could never tell. She imagined Reena as the sort of person who was pretty detached in bed, but once in a while would really let herself go, but extremely. Then she would start using her fists and speaking in tongues. What would it take to get her this way? Probably nothing the other person could think of or do on purpose, maybe the moon on certain months, maybe chemicals. Did she like to have her hair pulled?

Bernadette's mind wandered between her own shoes, the slowly circulating crowd, and her speculations on Reena. Meanwhile her eyes scanned the room methodically, or at least gave the impression of looking around. A high school group was coming down the hall with sketch pads, blocking her view of the Eighteenth Century. She stood up a little straighter and fixed her eyes on a Manet on the opposite wall. The woman in the painting had Reena's blank pallor and below-the-radar presence. Reena could be a Manet, one of these thinking pictures you can't see through, no matter how long you stare at them.

This got Bernadette thinking about herself – that she herself, Bernadette, was no longer quite intact. Down to the very level of her DNA, her double-helix no longer wrapped around itself in some kind of dance but was rather always seeking to escape itself, like a tail running away from its dog. And this had everything to do with the museum. She's worked there for some time already, but this morning, striding through the lobby to her station, she realized that if she were mugged on the street by the museum, she would be hard pressed to pick out her assailant in a police line-up behind a one-way mirror. She's never been able to look at it. Not really.

The Thinker, another guard, a limited man, who'd been here much longer than Bernadette, had once read to her from a small sheaf of papers, clearly part of a larger assemblage, whose neatly written manuscript purported to tell a story of his days as a schoolmaster before the war. His words came out in a steady hiss that reminded her of the old steam heating system in her prewar apartment building. "You know what a Leyden jar is it's the classical apparatus for storing electricity, you've seen it over and over again in the laboratory. There was once upon a time a celebrated physicist, a man of science, called Professor Tyndall. He was manipulating a large battery of Leyden jars, while lecturing. Through some carelessness in handling them he received a very severe electric shock. It was so severe it knocked him out. For a few moments Professor Tyndall was insensible. You follow? Well, when Professor Tyndall came to, he found himself in the presence of his audience. There was he, there was the audience, there were the Leyden jars. In a flash he realized perfectly what had happened: he knew he had received the battery discharge. The intellectual consciousness, as he called it, of his position returned more promptly than the optical consciousness. What is meant by that is as follows. He recovered himself, so to speak, very nearly at once. He was conscious on the spot of what had occurred. Professor Tyndall had

great presence of mind. He was able to address the audience and reassure it immediately. But *while he was reassuring* the audience, his body appeared to him cut up into fragments. For instance, his arms were separated by his trunk, and seemed suspended in the air. He was able to reason and also to speak as though nothing were the matter. But his optic nerve was quite irrational. It reported everything in a fantastic manner. Had he believed what it reported, he would not have been able to address his audience as he did, or in fact address them at all. Do you follow so far? Had it been the optic nerve speaking it would have said, 'As you see, I am all in pieces!' As it was, he said, 'You see! I am uninjured and quite as usual.' Have you followed?"

During this lecture, Bernadette had yawned without intermission. Her yawns had increased in intensity, like the crescendo of howls coming from a dog who is compelled to listen to a musical performance or to sounds above a certain pitch. At length, she remained with her mouth at full stretch, with difficulty getting it closed again as she saw that *The Thinker* was finishing. Recalling it today however is quite different. There it is. The museum speaks to its audience via its optic nerve after a tremendous trauma. Whether it spoke to itself too in such fashion she was unclear. And whether it even possessed such a thing as an intellectual unconscious was for another day. Bernadette, at least, had recollected the story, so she was satisfied that she was in possession of one.

Of course she had seen almost every tiny component of the museum many times over, but all she had were corners, colors, textures, and everything seen with eyes too wide open, with her peripheral vision – in part, she already suspected, not because of some fault of her own, but because the museum itself was in some way homologous to peripheral perception. It barely knew what it was or where. It was the perfect place for breeding speculations.

It reminded her of a conversation she'd had with Josef (pronounced *yo-sef*), whom she'd kind of lived with in Berlin, about the

first museum ever. But this conversation also involved some details about magpies because there were two magpies on the ground outside the kitchen window where they were talking. Bernadette had remarked how pretty the magpies were and Josef said, "Yes. And they're such horrible birds." He gave some examples of their very spiteful behavior, which he said he never believed when other people told him about it, until he saw it himself. Bernadette said "What about crows." "Crows are wonderful birds." Bernadette had seen the day before on her way home an amazing twilight of crows over a copper building in the middle of town. Josef told her that right behind that building was the first museum that ever was and that it had been designed by Hegel. Only now did she realize he might have been lying, and about other things too. For Bernadette, such ambiguities were the source of a certain stillness, pleasantly unhinged her.

Bernadette checked her watch and saw that it was time to go. She noticed that Reena had already quit her post. As fast as she could go without running, past noblemen, landscapes, still lives, crucifixions and other symbolically-charged scenes, Bernadette made a beeline for the Tapestries. In the stairwell she could hear Reena's leisurely footsteps echoing just ahead of her. She went down the stairs two and three at a time, but when she arrived in the service corridor, Reena was already coming out of the changing room with a maybe-not-even-there smile for Bernadette. Her eyes were bright and her hair looked windblown. Her boy's white oxford shirt was frayed in the collar and in the cuffs, and through it, her purple lace bra was visible. She looked even more perfect than Bernadette had remembered.

"Oh, My God," Rain whispered to Kati in the back of the changing room. "Did she, like, pick up her clothes at a homeless shelter on the way here?" I wonder how many times she's done it, Jenny wondered to herself. She imagined Reena and the drummer/model leaning against a big, black van, his drumsticks jammed in



his back pocket. She was very cold, and had got his saliva in her hair, but it was worth it. Then Jenny pictured Reena and another imaginary boy on a ski lift. They began to kiss and couldn't stop themselves. *How cool*, Jenny thought. Hands down, Reena Spaulings was the coolest girl in the entire world.