



Lines

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by Dr. Hurley

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It was a bright, bitter morning in January and the streets of Montmartre seemed to be singing with cold. Edgar Degas looked out from a first floor window as Jenney Musson approached the door to his building. Some boys from the neighbourhood had trapped an injured tabby cat and were cheerfully tormenting it, dragging it along the cobbles by its tail. It was the noise from the cat that had drawn him to the window. He watched as Jenney chased the boys away, scattering them to the four winds. He heard the insults they hurled at her as they fled, and smiled a little.

They called her ugly. And they were right, she was – there in the weak yellow sunlight – profoundly so. At 14, Jenney Musson was pipe cleaner thin with greasy hair, wide set eyes and an insolent, mean looking mouth that made her look like she was lying at all times, even when telling the god's honest truth. She had a week's worth of grime under her fingernails and a face so highly polished it could have been inlaid with mother-of-pearl. 'A girl made of crumpled paper', he hastily noted this down in his sketchbook.

This was the first time he'd asked Jenney to pose for him, but he knew the family well and had drawn both her sisters. The mother, Madame Musson, like all the mothers of dancing girls, was a laundress with hands as rough as wet rope. Charlotte, the middle sister, was fuller in every respect, but had an irritating habit of thieving small change from around the house. Marie, the oldest, was dead already, washed up on the banks of the river with barely a scratch or a mark on her, save for a ring on her finger and a curious grin on her face, so they said. Paris was a messy place, where messy things happened.

Jenney undressed in the centre of the room with the ease of someone who cared little for her own body, and knew nothing of its worth. She recognized that this man, who was old and bad-tempered enough to be her father, posed no real threat and besides, they needed money. For years Edgar had haunted the Paris Opera, a ghost in its halls, doggedly sketching the ballerinas and their wealthy abonnées, the men who fawned over and flirted with them. To him these girls were purely creatures of movement. He was interested in muscle and sinew, not flesh. In the stretch and flex. In line, not bulk.

Edgar began to draw. The nape of her neck. A shoulder blade. Her jutting collarbone. Jenney could hear only the noise of charcoal scratching across paper and the faint tick-tocking of the grandfather clock in the hallway outside – she was in for a long morning. In the stillness her gaze came to rest on a canvas leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. In it an acrobat hung, suspended from the rafters of a grand auditorium by her teeth, as a large unseen crowd gawped on, agog.

'Who's that woman?' she asked, nodding towards the picture.
 'That is Miss La La, she's a performer at the Cirque Fernando, in Montmartre.'
 'Do you think it hurts her to do that?'
 'I imagine it's excruciating, yes. It's really a wonder she has any teeth left. But you should see the next part of her act. She fires a canon suspended on chains. She holds it in her mouth whilst she dangles from the trapeze. It's quite breathtaking.'

It looked warm in the painting, inviting and effervescent, like staring up at the world through a beer glass or an amber necklace. She could almost hear the rustle of skirts and feel the shoulders of the other audience members butting against her own. Even a fool could see that the acrobat, Miss La La, must be in tremendous pain, hanging there over the open mouths of the crowd, but in the picture she looked serene, like a moth fluttering effortlessly around a flame. There was no hint of what lay beneath; a safety net; or a pool filled with circling sharks? It was utterly impossible to say.

'What's it about, that painting?'
 Edgar paused for a second, taken aback. Her impertinence amused him. 'What do you think it's about?'
 'I think she's a lot like me' she said.
 'Meaning?' He tried his best to stifle a smirk.
 'The girls you draw are like spiders, spinning pretty webs.'

Edgar felt his origami heart unfurl, just a little.

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*This week, we're featuring a new collaboration between photographer Naama Sarid, whose work we've featured in the past. Naama has been kind enough to share her work with some of our other contributors, and they have been writing and creating based on her wonderful photography. This piece is inspired by **Exposure № 068: Butterfly**. See Naama Sarid's other Snake-Oil Cure contributions **here**.*

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*Ursula Glitch is the awkward, geeky, bony brainchild of Freya Hardy, a freelance writer and book editor from Eastbourne, a small town on the South Coast of England, where she lives with her husband, Gaz, and her two-year-old twin daughters. She has contributed to Sleaze Nation, Bolz, Uplift, Ladyfriend Zine, Lionheart and Flamingo Magazine amongst others. Her other contributions to Snake-Oil Cure can be found **here**.*



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