

# Painting By Numbers

a novel by  
Tom Gillespie

“I could not stop reading. With a fascinating subject matter and a surprising journey, Painting by Numbers is a stunningly clever and mesmerising read that will keep you enthralled to the very last page.”

Alison Wells, author

“[Gillespie]... is the new Dan Brown with a splash of John Grisham. I couldn't put it down.” 10/10

Minxemoo Reviews

“An absolutely thrilling thriller. When they coined the phrase 'This book is a real page turner', they were talking about 'Painting By Numbers' ”

S & J Book Shelf Reviews

“a story that had me thinking. Even after I'd finished it, I had to go back and read parts of it again. I was completely fascinated...”

The eBook Review



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Artwork by Crooked Cat

Painting By Numbers: 978-1-908910-37-0

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Printed for Crooked Cat Publishing by Createspace

*First Black Line Edition, Crooked Cat Publishing Ltd. 2012*

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## **The Author**

Tom Gillespie was born and grew up in a small town just outside Glasgow. After completing a Masters in English at Glasgow University, he spent the next ten years pursuing a musical career as a singer/songwriter, playing, recording and touring the UK and Europe with his band. He now lives in Bath with his wife, daughter and hyper-neurotic cat, where he works at the University as an academic English lecturer.

Tom writes long and short fiction. A number of his stories are published by [www.eastoftheweb.com](http://www.eastoftheweb.com). He is also a regular contributor to [fridayflash.org](http://fridayflash.org).

Tom's writing has been described as terse, minimalist, hyper-realistic and ambiguous, where layers of meaning are conveyed using a concise and economical style. He enjoys dark, edgy psychological dramas that explore the trials of modern life, and the often surreal complexities of the human mind.

Painting by Numbers is his first novel. He is currently working on his second, along with a collection of short stories.

## **Acknowledgement**

My thanks to

Patrick Ismond  
Priscilla Morris  
Dr. Fynn Scheben  
Tim and Trina Ratcliffe  
Maureen Vincent-Northam  
Helen Howell and  
Laurence and Steph at Crooked Cat Publishing

for their support, encouragement and unflinching honesty

Love and gratitude to you all

Tom Gillespie  
Bath, October 2012

# **Painting By Numbers**





*In the dark, the painting remains motionless, silent, expectant. But when the morning sun glistens through the skylight windows of the gallery, the surface begins to move, slowly at first, but then with increasing purpose and urgency. The minutiae of the moment gather together and spill out across the canvas. The colours assimilate and align. The geometry calibrates to exact specifications. Objects and players assemble at their marked positions. Every motif and emblem returns to its designated space within the frame. The gilded wooden border creaks as the flow of paint pushes against the joints. Then the cracks and blemishes of age race across the reformed arena, and like the memory of water, the network of predetermined patterns follow hidden and mysterious pathways, scattering, dividing and multiplying as they rush to complete their journey. At last, the painting is one. It sinks back into the wall and settles on the three brass hooks that hold it in place. Soon the attendants will arrive to take up their daylight vigil. The doors will swing open, the ambient air temperature will be checked and regulated, and he will come to sit and look and wonder.*



# **PART I**



## The Loss of Innocence

Jacob inserted the key in the narrow socket and turned it anti-clockwise until the pendulum started to swing. He carefully reset the hands to exactly twenty-three minutes to nine and when he was sure that the mechanism was willing to maintain its own momentum, he closed the glass casement, buttoned up his coat and left the flat. He caught the number six to Argyle Street and then the underground to Kelvinbank. From there it was a short walk across the river to the city gallery. As he approached the entrance, a uniformed attendant was removing the steel security bar from the front door. He held it open and Jacob squeezed through. Inside, he passed his coat and bag to the cloakroom assistant. She studied his expression.

“Are you all right, Jacob? You don’t look well today.”

“I’m fine.”

She handed him a ticket and he ascended the grand staircase directly opposite. On the second floor, he entered the Baroque Room. He walked to the end and sat down facing the painting. The lights on the ceiling were too bright. They produced an artificial glare and the resultant surface sheen obscured some of the detail. But Jacob had found the perfect spot, exactly three inches from the end of the bench, to sit and contemplate the vast mystery of the canvas. He took out his notebook and flicked the page corners until he located the last entry. He glanced around to see if anyone else had come in but the room was still vacant. He liked this time in the morning. It never lasted very long, but for a brief, tantalizing moment, he was alone with his painting, with no distractions, no other eyes or minds removing ideas from the great work that loomed over him. He fumbled in his shirt pocket for a pencil, licked the end and wrote down the date at the top of a fresh page. Now he was ready to look.

The painting was large, twelve feet by eight, and was hung in a vulgarly elaborate gold frame. An adolescent girl was standing on the left hand side of a mahogany panelled room. She was in formal dress. Cream and gold flowing garments covered pale skin. The cloth was heavily embroidered in an ornate pattern of floral swirls and loops, her face pallid with a slight hint of crimson around the cheek bones. She was leaning against a full-length mirror with a similarly ornate border, the back of her head revealed in the reflection. In her left hand, she was holding what appeared to be a leather-bound book, with the words *Poemas de M-* inscribed on the cover, her fingers obscuring the rest of the title. There was a small table to her immediate right with a wineglass balanced on the edge. Her right arm was extended and her forefinger was touching the rim. On the far left, a panelled door was slightly ajar. A hand gripped the edge and an indistinct shadowy figure was peering through the gap directly at the girl, the eyeballs painted in an intense brilliant white that stood out against an impenetrable black background. Reflected in the mirror and on the right, a courtier was kneeling on the floor. He was also in formal attire, a crimson sleeveless tunic over a white flannel shirt, puffed up three quarter length breeches and mud-splattered boots. Against the rear wall, a blazing fire illuminated the room. There appeared to be papers burning amongst the flames. The entire scene was shrouded in a creamy yellow haze that gave it a dreamlike quality.

For the last three days Jacob had been working on the area between and immediately surrounding two letters, D and V which were just visible on the neck of a dead pheasant laid out next to the girl’s feet. He drew a line with his eye from the top right hand corner of the letter V to the leg of the table. He then measured the actual distance with a small reel of thread, carefully avoiding any contact with the surface. He calculated a relative distance of three feet, twenty-one point three inches. This matched an earlier reading he had taken from the knuckle of the courtier’s left hand to the outside edge of the girl’s dress. It also corresponded to the distance from the tip of the girl’s extended right index finger to the floor. He entered the data and returned his attention to the small space between the two letters. He was about to extend the spool again when he noticed a tiny blemish on the down stroke of the V. Part of it was missing, as though it had faded or flaked off. He scribbled the observation in his pad and put it down on the bench. By now a few people had come in and were shuffling around. He stretched and looked at his watch; twenty to twelve. Over three hours had passed. He put the cotton reel and ruler in his bag and went downstairs to the café.

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He pointed at the counter and the girl picked out a plate of sandwiches.

“Did you say tuna?” the girl asked.

“Mm.”

She handed him four triangles of soft white bread, crusts removed, neatly stacked together, with a thin layer of fish paste, barely visible between the slices.

“Drink?”

“Coffee. Black, one sugar.”

While she prepared it, he opened up each sandwich and picked the cucumber out. “What shall I do with this?”

The girl turned and looked at his outstretched hand. She shook her head and collected the gluey mass from his palm. He wiped the residue on his trousers and waited by the till.

“I don’t like them either. It’s an overrated vegetable, don’t you think?” she said, placing the cup and saucer in front of him.

He handed her a ten-pound note and the till drawer sprung open.

“Trouble is they’re in everything aren’t they?”

“What?”

“Cucumber – sandwiches, salads – what’s that Greek thing?”

“Tsatsiki?”

“That’s it. Tsatsiki’s loaded with the stuff. Disgusting. They are strange though, you know what I mean? Are they a vegetable or are they a fruit?” She picked at the slimy residue on her fingers. “Look, seeds. That means they must be a fruit, but they aren’t, are they?”

“Can I have my change?”

“Oh sorry. Why are we so obsessed with them? Is it the weather?”

He placed the cup and plate on a tray and found a table in the corner. Opening his notebook, he examined some of his most recent entries. He flicked back four or five pages and scanned previous calculations and deductions, following a logical path to the last result. Although he had unravelled and unpicked a sizable portion of the work, he was far from finished. The damaged letter puzzled him. The missing fragments had created yet another complex set of variables that he couldn’t explain. Perhaps it was the result of its age or some form of camouflage that the painter had employed to confuse and mystify. Or it could be that the letter was still intact, but he just couldn’t see it. He turned to an empty page and in the top left corner he wrote,

Poemas De M– Who?

“Hello.”

He looked up. It was one of the gallery attendants.

“My boss Bob says I should say hello.” The attendant looked fresh-faced and a little flustered. He was trying to squint at the pad.

“Hello,” said Jacob. “Why do you have to say hello to me?”

“Bob says you’re in here that often you might as well be one of us, so – oh, my name’s Ian, by the way.”

“Hello Ian. Are you new?”

“Yes, I started yesterday. Are you an art teacher or something?” He squinted at Jacob’s notebook. “Is that your er... lecture notes or–?” He glanced up to his left. There was a security camera pointing directly down at them from the ceiling.

“See for yourself.” Jacob handed him the book.

“What’s this? What are all these numbers?”

“They are to do with one of the paintings upstairs.”

“The one that you’re studying?”

“That’s right.”

“So the numbers are like some kind of calculations?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“How what?”

“How do they–? What are you calculating?”

“Well, these here, for example, relate to three different types of pigment.”

The attendant looked at him, his mouth hanging open.

“Colours.”

“Huh?”

“Well, 38 represents taupe.”

“Top?”

“Taupe, light brown.”

“Oh right.” His mouth started to pull down at the edges. “So it’s a bit like painting by numbers?”

“Something like that, I suppose.”

“And what about this long list down here? What’s all that about then?” His eyes flicked back to the camera.

“Look, Ian, what’s going on?”

The attendant turned back.

“Nothing, nothing’s going on. I’m just curious, you know?”

“Curious.”

“We’re all interested.”

“Who is ‘all’?”

“All of the lads here. We’re all interested. You know?”

“Really?”

“Oh yes.”

Jacob dropped the coffee cup down on the saucer. The clatter resounded around the café and a few of the patrons glanced up from their newspapers and cream teas. He stood up and the attendant shifted his footing. There was a long pause while the boy tried to decipher Jacob’s body language. Finally Jacob broke the silence.

“You know what, Ian,” he said, leaning into the attendant’s face, “tell your pals up there,” he pointed at the ceiling, “curiosity killed the cat.” The attendant grimaced and returned the notebook.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

Jacob gathered up his things and pushed past him. As he left the cafeteria he looked back and saw the assistant pick up his empty cup and put the rim to his nose. Back at the painting, Jacob tried to gather his thoughts and find the spot he had left. But the assistant’s behaviour had unsettled him and he scratched his head in frustration. It was no use. He’d have to start again tomorrow.

When he got home, the flat was empty. He found a small handwritten note on the kitchen table.

*Got tired of waiting*

*Out with Rhona*

*Dinner in oven*

*Don’t choke on it*

*Don’t wait up*

*E*

He pulled the lukewarm casserole out of the oven and sat down to eat. As he picked at the dehydrated remains, the cat appeared and rubbed itself against his leg. He bent down to stroke its back, pulling at its tail gently. It purred and went over to its bowl by the fridge. He got up and searched the cupboards for food, but he couldn’t find any so he scooped out a portion of dried remains from his plate and dropped it into the cat’s bowl. The cat sniffed at it for a few seconds, turned up its nose and began to whine.

“I don’t have anything else,” he said, pulling its tail again. “It’s your mother’s fault.” The cat complained again and jumped up on to the worktop. He opened the window and it disappeared out onto the roof terrace. A cool breeze blew in. Jacob stretched and searching for his cigarettes, he unlocked the terrace door. The cat had now climbed up onto the roof and was making its way towards its favourite chimney stack about three doors down. Jacob sat on the step and lit a cigarette. His hand shook as he blew out the match. It had been over six months now and, although he felt he was close to the breakthrough he was looking for, the intensity of his research was taking its toll. From the beginning, his department had been dismissive and the Dean had categorically refused to grant him a sabbatical. He felt alone and isolated, grappling with something unsupported, just out of his reach. He inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs, held it there for a few seconds and then blew the thick cloud high into the air. He watched the cat as it scurried round the chimney pot, sat down on top of the apex of the roof and studied the street scene below. He finished his cigarette and went back into the flat.

In his study, he booted up the computer and started to transfer the day’s findings to his documents file. When he was almost complete, he clicked on the sub-folder marked history, and re-examined his notes.

In the course of his investigations, Jacob had uncovered a multitude of theories and suppositions about the

painting. It was an enigma that had baffled art historians for many years. It was thought to be Spanish, completed some time between 1631 and 1642, and indeed x-ray and carbon dating confirmed this to be the case. But no tangible evidence of its existence emerged until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when it was recovered, smoke damaged but intact, from a house fire in Nimbes, a small village in the Languedoc region of Southern France. Town Hall records revealed that it had been owned by a Monsieur Heddon, a local magistrate, but that he had inexplicably refused to reclaim it. The local council took possession and after almost ten years of languishing in a basement storeroom, it was finally auctioned off to a private collector from Paris. It was during this period, that it most likely acquired the title *La Perde de L'Innocence* – The Loss of Innocence. It was bought and sold a further three times until finally, in 1923, a mystery benefactor donated it to the City Art Gallery.

The artist was unknown, although following further restorative work, the initials D and V were revealed on the neck of the dead pheasant, elegantly laid out by the girl's feet. This discovery prompted historians to speculate that it was the work of Diego Velázquez, Spain's most celebrated Baroque artist. He was certainly a possible candidate, a theory that the gallery was keen to promote. The colours, the use of light and shadow, the realistic setting and the strange manipulation of perspective seemed consistent with his style and approach. But Jacob wasn't convinced. Velázquez was renowned for allegorical painting, work that was highly complex and layered with hidden meaning. To simply paint his initials on the side of a dead bird was somewhat implausible. Also, little was known about Velázquez's personal life beyond 1630, so it was very difficult to substantiate or refute any of the prevalent theories. And it didn't explain its discovery in France. Jacob believed it was more likely that it was the work of an almost unknown artist called Manuel Piñero. Records suggest that Piñero had been a student and understudy of Velázquez, and for a short period had assisted him on a number of commissions, but biographical details of the man were hard to come by and a great deal of fog surrounded his life. In fact, some critics had even questioned his relationship with Velázquez at all. Jacob's research, however, had uncovered a number of consistencies in style between the Glasgow painting and two or three other compositions attributed to Piñero.

The characters in the scene had also generated a great deal of controversy and possible further links to Velázquez. Some scholars believed that the girl belonged to an ancient aristocratic dynasty from northern Italy, and that the painting contained hidden references to a number of Renaissance paintings. It was true that Velázquez had travelled extensively, visiting both Belgium and Italy, and that a vast spectrum of historic and contemporary allegorical artists had influenced his work. However, the link was tenuous. Another theory was that the girl was, in fact, his niece. Velázquez would frequently use his own family and friends as models, and a girl, allegedly his niece, appears in his most famous work, 'Las Meninas'. But Jacob couldn't see the resemblance. He therefore believed that the girl was a fiction, an imagined beauty. As for the courtier, he was also highly problematic and again may have been a deliberate fabrication, devised by the artist to draw the viewer in: to speculate and mythologize the apparent profundity of the work.

Rubbing his eyes, he closed the documents file and opened his email. He scrolled down through pages of unread messages, mostly from his department secretary, until he spotted an email from a gallery in Seville. He opened it up and scanned the message, translating and skipping over unfamiliar lexis:

*Dr Boyce,*

*Thank you for your enquiry. We have one small lithograph by the artist Manuel Piñero... The work is untitled but is believed to date from between 1628 and 1632 and forms part of a collection of sketches and outlines made by the artist in preparation for a larger composition that was allegedly destroyed by the artist on completion... A second related sketch is currently in storage at El Prado, Madrid... I have attached a jpeg image of the work I hope you find this information helpful.*

*Kind regards,*

*Dr. Maria Agustina Sarmiento*

*Curator*

*Museo de Antiguiedades y Arte*

*Sevilla*

He clicked on the attachment and the image filled the screen. The drawing was of a young woman holding what appeared to be a partially opened fan. Though she looked a little older than the central figure in *The Loss of Innocence*, her features were very similar. Using the mouse, he zoomed in on her face but the image became over pixelated and lost definition. He saved it to his research file and shut down his computer. Opening the top drawer of his desk, he fumbled around until he found a postcard print of the painting. He liked to keep notes on cards as well as on disks as it helped him store the information systematically and logically in his head. He copied the figures and calculations onto the back of the card, careful to cite readings accurately. He turned it over and



looked at the painting again. It was a study of the left hand portion of the work. The courtier was missing from the scene and the girl's glance towards him now seemed different. Her emotional state was altered in some way. The look of fear had transformed into one of vague indignation or disgust. He shook his head, put the card in the drawer and went to bed.

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He heard her come in around one, keys rattling in the lock followed moments later by a loud clatter as she knocked something over in the kitchen. She pushed open the bedroom door and it hit the wall with a loud thud. He lay still and listened to her grunts as she grappled with the complexity of undressing in the dark. Finally, she slumped down with a sigh on her side of the bed.

“Did you have a good night?” he asked.

“Did you enjoy your meal?” she slurred.

It was too late for an argument. He touched her back as she dropped her nightgown over her shoulders. She slid in next to him, rested her head on his arm and mumbled something.

“What was that?” He nudged her. But she was already asleep, her throat vibrating gently. He turned on his side to escape the smell of alcohol and cigarette smoke and concentrated on his own breathing.

When he woke, she had already left for work. In the kitchen, he poured a coffee and lit up a cigarette. She hated him smoking in the flat but she'd gone so what the hell, he thought. He searched for an ashtray and on the worktop, he discovered a small scrap of paper with the date 23<sup>rd</sup> September written neatly in the centre. It wasn't in her handwriting. He glanced over at the calendar on the wall. September 23<sup>rd</sup>. He stared at the numbers, hoping something would pop into his head.

After a while, he put the paper back where he'd found it and poured himself another coffee.

Jacob shifted position on the bench. He was too far right. He moved three quarters of an inch to his left and found his line. He took out his pad and began working again. The letter V, although apparently incomplete, appeared to sit at an angle that drew the eye towards the girl's right hand.

The hand was the first element of the mystery he had worked on, gathering notes and investigating a variety of scholarly theories and arguments. It was held at an unusual angle with the small finger tucked under the palm, the two middle fingers tight together and the forefinger pointing down to the floor. Allegorical artists had often used hands to convey secret messages and hidden truths. The folded finger could indicate a religious reference or a coded signal to another artist, and the two together may allude to the holy trinity, the crucifixion or piety of God. But it was the forefinger, twisted to a near impossible angle that seemed to point directly towards the letter.

He got up and measured the distance. As he approached the surface, a left handed triangle began to appear, from the fingertip to the letter, up to the left eye of the dark intruder peering through the door, and finally back to the girl's hand. He grabbed his bag and rummaged around until he found a blank postcard. He plotted the three lines of the triangle. Then from the corners he drew another line to the middle of each side. Where the lines intersected in the centre, they crossed directly over a silver candlestick on the floor by the fireplace.

Jacob stood back to take in the whole painting. The triangle now seemed an obvious and deliberate design choice. As he moved slowly back towards the surface, the holder remained lifelike and remarkably accurate. The flames of the fire glistened on the silver surface and crimson coloured wax had formed a solid puddle around the base. He could just make out a tiny thread of grey smoke swirling from the top of the wick. And there was something else, on the base, inside the sheen of the metal, a reflection. He couldn't be sure without a magnifying glass, but it looked like a face, blurred and indistinct. He screwed up his eyes to see if any familiar shape or feature would form but the reflection remained undefined. He pulled his head back and the image seemed to fade and blend with the surface of the holder. Tone and colour shifted slightly as he moved away. He glanced up at the gallery lights. Perhaps they were causing a distortion, an optical illusion.

He returned to the bench. A girl was sitting on the other side, with her back to him. He turned his head slightly and he could just see her shoulder, pale and delicate skin, partially covered by a loose fitting strapped top. Her breathing was laboured, her small frame moving gently up and down. He opened his notepad but he could hear her throat click as she inhaled. Every few seconds she sniffed and wiped her nose with the end of her finger. Jacob fumbled in his coat for a handkerchief but his pockets were empty.

She stood up and disappeared behind him. He wanted to turn but knew that the movement would draw attention to him so he waited to see if she would move back into view. A few seconds passed. She reappeared to his left. She was kneeling down by the side of the painting opposite, examining some detail in the bottom corner. She was in her mid twenties, looking to him to be a bit frail and unkempt. Her hair was dark, tied back in a ponytail but a few strands had escaped and curled up around her ears. He noticed a small bald patch, a triangular

area of bare skin, to the left of her crown. Its smooth whiteness stood out against the black of her hair.

She had a canvas bag over her shoulder that was adorned with a collection of badges of various shapes and sizes. He leaned over to try and read the words on a small triangular-shaped plate that glistened under the gallery lights, but he was too far away. She sat back on her knees and sighed. Jacob looked away, afraid that she might spot him leering. He waited a moment and looked again, but she had gone. He glanced around the gallery. A few people were milling about, gazing vacantly at the artwork. His notebook fell on the floor and as he reached down to pick it up, something flickered across his face. In the painting, the surface of the candleholder stood out, bright and gleaming against the deep set black of the mahogany panelling. He licked the end of his pencil and continued his work.

## The Glasgow Hum

The flat was cold and dark when he got home. He hung up his coat and bag and checked the clock. As the pendulum swung backwards and forwards, the mechanism echoed reassuringly down the hall. He looked into the bedroom and he could just make out Ella's shape under the eiderdown. He peered at the swollen mound for a few seconds and when he was sure that it was gently rising and falling, he carried on to the kitchen. He opened the fridge and checked the contents. There was still nothing to eat but he spotted a half empty pack of beers lying in the bottom drawer. He pulled out a bottle and popped the top. Sitting down at the kitchen table, he sipped the beer slowly and closed his eyes. A scratching noise at the window made him turn. The cat was outside, pawing at the glass. He pulled at the heavy sash and it hopped in.

"Let's see if we have anything for you this evening," he said, pulling its tail affectionately. In the cupboard, he found an opened foil of food. He scooped out the remaining portion into the cat's bowl and it gulped at the contents, purring contentedly. He opened the door of the terrace and sat down on the step with his beer.

The hum had returned. It was a low pitched indistinct drone that seemed to begin around midnight and go on until just before dawn. For months, residents in the East End had been complaining about it, saying that it was causing all sorts of medical and psychological disturbances. The council had received a number of angry letters, and the story had even made the papers and the local TV news. Noise abatement officers had been out a few times to the area with measuring devices, but they had failed to locate the source, as the hum seemed to elude measurement or electronic detection. The other strange thing about the phenomenon was that not everyone could hear it. The pitch was such that, ironically, only people with poor hearing could pick up the subsonic rhythmical vibrations the hum generated in the atmosphere.

But despite the local hostility to the drone, Jacob liked it. He found it soothing and reassuring. When he focused on the ebb and flow of its gentle reverberations, it slowed his heart rate and calmed the galloping thoughts in his head. Tonight, it seemed slightly louder with an additional melodious tone buried somewhere within the heart of the sound. He hummed along quietly, trying to match the pitch and after a moment, the cat brushed against his leg and joined in, whining along in disharmony. He smiled and sipped his beer.

"You're a good singer," he said, flicking at its ears with his finger. The cat swiped its paw at him playfully, then leaping onto the wall, clambered over the roof until it reached its usual position perched on top of the apex of number 23. A sound behind him made him turn.

"Are you coming to bed?" Ella was standing over him in the doorway, her face crumpled with sleep.

He stood up and leaned over to kiss her but she turned away and disappeared into the toilet. He finished his beer, locked the roof terrace door and switched everything off. When he got to the bedroom, she was back under the eiderdown. He removed his clothes, put on his pyjamas and slid in next to her.

"You're freezing," she said, inching away from him.

He lay on his back and focused on the hum. He imagined the sound vibrating the oxygen molecules inside the room, each atomic particle spinning gently and knocking into its nearest neighbour; a great underground machine generating thousands of tiny resonating spheres spilling out from a fissure in the Earth's surface and combining to form a grand unified symphony of harmonious movement. He closed his eyes and dropped instantly into a deep, restless sleep.

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He was running through the oil thick darkness of night, skimming the surface of the Earth with his toes, careering over wasted ground and dereliction. He stumbled and then, regaining his momentum, he raced onwards, the ground sucking at his legs, trying to slow him down. A half moon appeared, and ahead of him he could see the tall spikes of a large wrought iron gate. He accelerated forward and threw his body at the frame. The ancient hinges screeched as the gate flew open. The hum was deafening now, a deep thunderous roar accompanied by an ear splitting scream like the hysterical wails of a child. He held his hands to his ears as he ran but the hum was inside his head, vibrating the plates of his skull and rattling his teeth together. Fumbling and

falling again, he reached a point he thought must be the epicentre. The rubble and mess cleared and a space opened up ahead of him.

As he approached, he could see a large spherical hole, its widening circumference disappearing into the darkness beyond. He stopped, and the soles of his feet touched down onto the dirt. He moved towards the edge and peered into the blackness. He inched closer and his left foot slipped over. Pulling back from the brink, his heel dislodged a protruding rock and it fell into the void. As it disappeared, the pulsating throb of the hum paused for a fraction of a second, but then resumed its relentless, demented mantra. As he turned to look for another projectile, he felt something grip his left ankle. Instinctively, he pulled back but the object tightened and began dragging him towards the hole. He grasped at it and tried to pull it off, but it coiled tighter still, cutting off the flow of blood to his foot. He sat down on the edge of the precipice and fumbled around for something to dislodge it.

Just under the surface of the dirt, his fingers located something hard and sharp. He prized a thin metal blade out of the ground and raising it above his head he thrust it with force into the invisible object beneath him. But as the point of the blade penetrated the thick leathery membrane of the sentient manacle, he was wrenched violently towards the waiting chasm. He snatched at the parched desiccated earth as his body was dragged over the side. First his legs, up to his waist, and then finally his whole body tumbled over.

He was falling now, backwards and head first, spinning uncontrollably into the darkness. The faint light on the surface quickly receded and within seconds it had vanished. He felt a sharp piercing pain in his spine between his shoulder blades. There was something alive, flapping wildly behind his head. The screaming had now reached a crescendo of disharmony. His body began to spasm and a searing heat raced up through his legs, into his chest and around his skull. His body twisted and contorted in agony as jet-black flames began to consume his skin and flesh. He prayed for the end to come but still his body continued to fall.

Soon, his existence was all but obliterated and nothing remained of him but a lifeless, blackened carcass tumbling forever downwards into the infinite abyss.

## Verlaine & Rimbaud

He woke up disorientated, his pyjamas drenched in sweat. He reached over for Ella but she wasn't there. It was light. He looked at the clock. 7.43 am. Stumbling out of bed, he went to look for her. She was in the kitchen, getting ready for work. She was frantically moving from one side of the room to the other, taking a bite of toast while inserting, removing and then re-inserting papers into her briefcase.

"I'm late," she said, gulping on a mug of coffee. She picked up her keys and pushed past him. Fumbling for a moment with the door lock, she stopped and turned to him.

"You're going in today, aren't you?" she said.

"Yes," he replied, through a prolonged yawn.

"Promise me, Jacob." She frowned at him.

"I will."

He went to give her a farewell kiss but she was out the door before he could reach her. He returned to the kitchen and looked for his cigarettes.

When he arrived at the museum, he found the doors bolted shut. A small handwritten note attached to the inside of the glass read,

*Closed for staff training. Open at 1.00 p.m.*

He'd forgotten it was Friday. He turned around and looked back down the steps into the world. It was raining and the streets beyond were deserted. He followed the path around the side of the building and left the grounds by the rear gate. He found himself at one end of an elegant tree-lined avenue. He hadn't been this way in years and even in the rain the simplicity of its design had a surprising clarity about it. The leaves were beginning to change colour and some lay scattered on the grass. He started walking and stopped by an old fountain on a grass verge. It was one of those municipal indulgences installed in the Victorian era and was rather worse for wear. On top was a broken statuette of a girl holding an urn and presumably water once poured out of its spout. One of her arms was missing and her face had lost a few features. The pool below was full of wet decomposing leaves and mould. Yet, despite all of its flaws, Jacob found it quite beautiful. On the side, there was a small inscription in Latin.

*In vita nos peto tripudium of verum.*

He carried on towards the river. The rain was getting heavier but he was too preoccupied to notice. When he reached the bridge he stretched over the side and looked down into the murky water. The Clyde was flowing fast, and appeared almost glutinous. Various bits of debris and rubbish floated past, an old tree stump, plastic shopping bags and polystyrene packaging. The traffic behind him had come to a standstill. From a van opposite, a man shouted to him.

"Yer no plannin oan jumpin in, ur ye?"

Jacob turned round and waved reassuringly, but then returned his attention to the mass of water flowing beneath him. He watched its progress as it cut through the city and disappeared behind a group of factory buildings. Crossing the bridge, he continued walking until he reached a few shops. There was a delicatessen full of Italian delights, a pokey little haberdashery, an off licence, and beneath that, in the basement, a second hand bookshop. He walked past, but then changed his mind. He descended the stairs and tried the door. It was locked, but there was a small bell to the right of the handle. He pulled the knob and a distant tinkling sounded somewhere at the back of the shop. He waited but no one came. He rang the bell again. Still no one. He was about to return to the street when the door suddenly opened. An old man stood in the doorway. He was holding a sandwich with crumbs clinging to his unshaven chin, and he had what looked like a long dribble of egg yolk on his cardigan.

"Sorry about the door, I'm having an early lunch. I don't usually lock it. It's just that we had some trouble last

week with the off licence. It's not ideal."

He ushered Jacob in. The shop was gloomy and warm. There were books everywhere spilling out of shelves, onto tables and gathering in great mounds on the floor. Each bookcase was labelled with titles such as Fiction, Philosophy, Military History and Existentialism, but a great many had escaped their categorical prison camps and invaded the territory of neighbouring genres. It was clear that at one time the shop had catered for the nearby university but it was highly unlikely that any student today would know of its existence. Jacob took off his coat and shook it gently. The man approached.

"Would you like me to take that? I'll hang it up for you."

Jacob handed him his sodden coat and suddenly felt as though he was in someone's private living space.

"Do you want something to dry yourself with?" the man asked.

"No, I'll be fine." Jacob wiped his face dry with the back of his hand.

The man disappeared and Jacob picked up a book from a pile immediately to his right. *The Secret Lives of Robert Burns*. He looked up to see if it corresponded with the category on the nearest shelf, *Human Biology*. Near enough, he thought. He put it down and moved on. Negotiating his way between teetering columns of moth-eaten literature, he picked up another and then another. Then he came to *Art History*. The makeshift paper label had curled at one edge, as though attempting to disengage and flee from the oak frame. It read *Art Hi*. Scanning the shelves for anything of interest, he was about to pick out a book when the man returned.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Do you have any books on the Baroque period?" Jacob said, unsure if he wanted the man to know what he was doing.

"I have a number of excellent titles concerning the Baroque period. Which school are you interested in?" the man continued.

Jacob looked at him. "Spanish."

"Ah, I see you are a man with discerning tastes. In my mind, the Spanish School is perhaps the most, how shall I put it," he paused for a moment to consider his words, "exemplary of the entire period. I'm sure there are a few reference books buried away somewhere." He glanced around his shop. "Someday I'll have time to sort everything out. But there is one book that I think you may be interested in." He went into a small room at the rear of the shop. Jacob could hear him rummaging around and muttering to himself. Finally, he reappeared clutching a small paperback.

"In my view, this is *the* definitive critique of Spanish Baroque painting. Jacob took the book and 'glanced down at the faded cover.

*"El Arte de la Alegoría, 1426 - 1640. By P. Manuelo, I can't say I've heard of him."*

But the bookkeeper wasn't listening; he was preoccupied with the front of his cardigan. He'd spotted the egg stain and was busy trying to pick the remains of the yolk out of one of the button holes.

"Oh dear, what a disaster I am today." He flicked the dislodged crumbs onto the floor. "Manuelo was one of the foremost art historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I tell you what, why don't you take the book anyway. I'm sure you'll find it invaluable." Turning the book over, Jacob scanned through the blurb on the back. There were a number of recommendations from other critics and a quote, presumably from the writer. It read,

*It is now clear to me that the intention of all allegorical artists is to mislead, manipulate and deceive.*

"Definitive, you say?" Jacob said.

"Yes, at one time, but what with modern investigative techniques, x-ray and the like, and the dreaded P.M."

"P.M.?"

He pursed his lips and whispered: "Post-Modernism. Some of his theories have been disproved, and of course, historians love to create jobs for themselves so they have a tendency to – how shall I put it?"

"Re-write history?"

"Exactly. No, I think you will find that the core of his work remains an indispensable research aid. Are you a student or—"

"Well, yes, kind of."

"We offer a ten percent discount on all books purchased. And for University staff members."

"How did you know that I worked at the University?"

"Well, I've been running this bookshop for forty-three years. You get to know people a bit. You start to develop a sixth sense about these things. And you are wearing academic's shoes," he added.

Jacob studied his loafers for a second. "Really? Are we that predictable?"

"I'm afraid so."

Jacob turned the book over again. "I was actually looking for something by the art critic Zillinger. I'm doing some research on allegorical art."

“Well, Zillinger is of course an undergraduate favourite but you strike me as someone who has moved onto a higher level of study.” He leaned in closer to Jacob and lowered his voice again. “Students these days, they steal absolutely everything, like magpies they are. I’m not a betting man but if I were I’d lay my life savings on the certainty that the entire works of Zillinger have been plagiarised time and again in thousands of lifeless regurgitated essays and assignments.

“No, Manuelo is the one for you, a forgotten genius, the one who made it possible for the likes of Zillinger to flourish.” He took the book from Jacob. “You see, Manuelo was an exponent of the law of empirical wisdom. He was the one who rediscovered the map, laid the signposts, showed all future scholars the way. I am sure you will find this book in-dis-pens-able.” He tapped out the syllables on the cover.

Jacob was beginning to feel uneasy. In the months he’d been working on the painting, he’d never come across a P. Manuelo or a law of empirical wisdom.

“It’s very strange,” Jacob said, “I’m not acquainted with either of them. What was it about?”

“Well, I’m no art scholar but it’s something to do with observational truth, the relationship between what can be seen and the actualities of reality. Manuelo believed that by looking at and observing a represented object or person, it becomes real, and in a painting, both the artist and the viewer instil some form of truth in these represented objects. Or is it the other way round? I’m sorry, it has been quite some time since I read it, so my précis may be a little confused. I think, basically it’s about the marriage of two belief systems, mathematical truth and spiritual belief, or to put it another way, a marriage of order and organised chaos, if you like.” He smiled.

Jacob flicked through the book and when he reached the glossary, he ran his finger down the list until he came to the entry for empirical wisdom. Strangely, the definition had been heavily crossed out and, underneath the blackened section, there was what appeared to be a short mathematical equation handwritten in small neat letters.

$$V=mp^3$$

Jacob closed the book. “So when did Manuelo come up with this theory of Empirical-?”

But the man was at the counter and was ringing it up on an old mechanical till. Jacob handed him the book and he dropped it into a small paper bag.

“That’ll be £6.39 which includes your ten percent discount plus a little more for wear and tear.”

It seemed a little expensive considering the state it was in but Jacob felt too embarrassed to refuse. Perhaps it would be a useful addition to his research. Or the man was simply a crafty salesman, a highly unlikely deduction considering the surroundings and his appearance. The man helped Jacob back into his coat.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Thank you,” said Jacob, unsure what he was thanking the man for. As he was leaving the shop, the man called out, “Don’t forget,” and tapped his waistcoat. Back on the street, Jacob could feel the book in his coat. It fitted snugly into the contours of his breast pocket. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve.

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Mrs Skinner jumped up from behind her desk as Jacob walked through the reception.

“Oh, Dr. Boyce.”

Jacob ignored her and carried on down the corridor towards his office. She caught up with him as he reached his door.

“Dr. Boyce. It’s good to see you. Is everything OK?”

“Fine.”

“It’s just that Professor Colby would like to talk to you and there’s quite a bit of mail waiting for you in your pigeonhole.”

Jacob turned to her.

“Oh,” she said, stepping back from him slightly.

“What sort of mail?”

“Well, there’s quite a bit, and your assignments that need to be marked.” Jacob fumbled with his keys.

“The deadline was some time ago,” she added.

He unlocked the door, stepped in and closed it quickly behind him. He could hear her muttering something on the other side and then she said loudly,

“Shall I tell the Professor that you’ll pop by to see him later then?”

After a few moments more, he could hear her retreating back up the corridor, her heels clacking on the hard

stone floor. He glanced round his office. The room was in chaos. Papers were strewn all over the carpet, cabinet drawers were half open with debris spewing out, and his desk was stacked with piles of assignments, overdue library books and the mouldy remains of a lunch. Negotiating the debris, he opened a window to let out the reek of stale smoke and rotting food.

He sat down and unpicked the half-eaten sandwich from the surface of his desk and dropped it in the overflowing bin next to his foot. He pulled at one of the drawers under the desk but it was jammed. Levering it backwards and forwards, it finally gave and flew open, sending more papers and postcards cascading down into his lap. He searched around until he located the university staff contact book and flicked through until he reached the mathematics department. Running his finger down the list he stopped at a name he recognised. 'Prof. J. Napier. West 4.21.' The Professor was renowned for his ground breaking work in the 70s on optical geometry but was also apparently somewhat of an authority on the history and development of mathematics. So he might be able to shed some light on the law of empirical wisdom. He was about to pick up the phone to call the switchboard when it started ringing. He hesitated for a moment, fearing a long tedious conversation with his Dean. But after a few more rings he changed his mind.

"Hello?" he said.

There was no response.

"Hello?" he repeated.

There was a faint click and the line went dead. He put it down and it rang once more.

"Hello!"

Again, there was no reply but this time he thought he could hear someone breathing on the other end.

"Who is this?"

The breathing paused for a second and then continued again.

"Is there anyone there?" He pressed the phone to his ear and he could just make out a faint wheeze or rasp in the breath.

"I'm going to hang up if you don't speak."

Suddenly, the line screeched and Jacob pulled the handset away from his ear, but when he listened again, the line was dead. He slammed the phone down in anger, quickly scribbled a note of the Professor's number and left his office.