Flamingo Dream

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This is by way of telling you the flamingo's color can range from scarlet to lightest pink, and that the stiltlike legs in my sketches, the curled necks and curved bills somehow comfort me. Now, as I blend red with varying amounts of white, I am beginning to relax.

And as I stare at my sketches, renderings inspired by National Geographic, I can almost smile about Mr. Dizard's courting of me, at his faint yellow envelopes (which I've not yet been able to throw away), at their embossed, paler yellow windmills.

Time, you may advise, is a sure salve, as is the incessant pattern of the waves so near me here. By the end of this summer I should have shrugged off the traces of regret, but I'll need three months of this screened porch and the sea so close that its wildest spray sprinkles the edges of the first green tiles.

I'm painting flamingoes on them, attempting to vary their poses so each block will be distinct, but there are two dozen or more stones, so I sketch and redesign the angle of their vistas: toward the ocean, twisting back on the marsh, an arch yearning for the sky. I suppose I could omit those tiles beneath the glider, those under the wicker planter, but what if I rearrange the furniture? No, I shall not do a halfway job at this, my first painting experience.

That I told Mr. Dizard I was a painter was of course my first mistake, though you might suggest I should never have responded to his cordial (yet so very correct) advertisement in the personals section of a magazine. But what harm was there in embellishing my talents? To paint, to compose sonatas, to arabesque on pointe below four balconies hanging like gilt rims above some stage — surely these are harmless fantasies. I know what you are, perhaps a little smugly, thinking: if such expansions are harmless, then how have I come to such unhappiness?

How was I to know he would take one sentence and cling to it like a tern to a morsel of shellfish? For that matter, have you not, early in the acquaintance of one you hoped to impress, exaggerated a talent, extended your achievements? Who has not, if I may press the point in my own defense, while writing to an admired suitor, stretched the truth, longing to be admired in return?

I always wrote him in the kitchen, the warmest room in winter. At the sun-soaked table, I'd prepare for what was to me a cumbersome responsibility: the task of revealing myself on paper. I'd spread my collection of bird notecards from the Natural History Museum, selecting a design which felt right for my message that week.

The morning of my fateful slip, geese circled the marsh outside my cottage. Their shadows fragmented the light on my counter, momentarily splattering gray shapes there which slid, soundless, to the floor and were gone. I selected a card which echoed my view: a detail from a Japanese screen by Maruyama Okyo titled "Geese Flying Over A Beach."

I described to Mr. Dizard, as well as I was able, the dappled brightness which had rippled across my strewn cards, the geese (finished with their morning feeding) lifting from the grasses, and the beautiful arched throbbing of their wings as they tilted seaward.

The card, I explained, was meant as a counterpoint to the scene framed by my window, for Okyo's tones were mute — stippled charcoal on the birds' spread
feathers, no other color. The geese, I told him, appeared to be fixed on a distant point.

They filled me with sadness and longing, those filmy birds. But I didn’t tell that to Mr. Dizard. No, I was careful about what I said to him. I, above everything else, did not want to appear desperate.

I did tell him, as I prepared to make myself a sandwich, that first — lie. Really, I couldn’t write that it was lunchtime: hunger was not a suitable topic. So I said, instead, “I must close now, Mr. Dizard; I expect the first layer on my new canvas is dry, and I long to resume work on it.”

Oh, the questions those words invoked. He hounded me about my painting: what medium did I work in, which painters did I admire, had I ever exhibited, how long had I painted?

What could I do but multiply my simple fabrication? Surely you would have been driven to do the same.

“All those years,” he replied. “My dear Miss Adelie, then you must think about sharing your work. I’m certain you’d be a success.”

“No, no, Mr. Dizard, I really couldn’t. I’m much too shy for anything — large scale. I merely give them as gifts occasionally.” That set him off again. I had to be so careful — that’s what tired me in the end. He began persistently asking for a small painting. The procrastinations, the protestations I was forced to invent wearied me. Eventually I became so caught up in our parry that I began to imagine I might be able to create something, just once, to mail him.

So, on a false spring day in late February, I walked to Art and Soul. It was so brightly sunny that I could almost believe the birds would soon be heading north again. And I began to be filled with a similar false hope as I perused those aisles of glossy supplies, an optimism which allowed me to imagine I might actually have a chance to become what I had implied I already was.

Wondering if I might sketch him something, I studied the Venus pencils’ mot­bled green surface, so like a turtle’s patterned back. The cluster of disposable palettes for oils made me certain I wanted to paint him something. I would depict the spring still weeks away which now teased with its temporary preview, allowing — so briefly — a respite from clinging mists, steady winds, the insistent, bitter cold. I would paint my garden as it would eventually be, alight with sprays of crocus, scilla, tulips, and daffodils.

I gathered tubes of oils, their titles in three languages. I pictured myself dabbing “Mars Yellow-Jaune de Naples-Amarillo de Napoles” on the virginal corner of my canvas. And if I ever ran away, if I ever needed an alias, then here it was: “Rose Madder-Garance Rose-Rosa de Garanza.”

Just then a woman swished past me; she smelled like flowers, something un­nameable, from far away. She asked the clerk about canvas stretchers! A real painter. Her hair glinted in the shopfront light, its lustre like a shad­owed patina of oak. Just as my optimism waned, I caught sight of myself in a mirror.

I looked miserable — unhappy but also so bleak with my beige hair, pale skin, paler eyes. You know the folly of comparisons — you may have dealt with them occasionally yourselves.

I fled, hurrying home. Snatching a card from the pile on my desk, I wrote Mr. Dizard the shortest, least prepared of all my notes:

Dear Mr. Dizard,
I’ve only a few minutes before the post, but I needed to send this
note, as we have been so frank with one another. A point has been troubling me, and I thought it best to bare my soul regarding it.

Mr. Dizard, your rather constant inquiries about my art work are upsetting. Artists should not be hurried, I'm sure you agree. These pleas for a painting are distracting. I beseech you, don't ask again. When one is ready for your eyes, I shall send it. I hope you are well.

Cordially,
Miss Adelie

To his credit, though not to my surprise (for I had come to know Mr. Dizard quite well through our regular exchanges), my admonition halted his requests. I did not foresee it then, but in a way this confrontation was a prelude to my final letter.

I felt a flutter of guilt at having so tested his politeness, though that was only the first time I did so. The guilt never resurfaced, until the end. After all, if we are to survive, we must inure ourselves to the cruelties life forces us to perpetrate. More often than not, we inflict the ultimate pain upon ourselves. These are my thoughts as I make my sketches on the porch.

Fledgling flamingoes, able only to support themselves on their knees, hobble, never erect. It is quite difficult to draw this baby bird, to suggest its awkwardness, its waiting... .

Our exchange followed February into March. When Mr. Dizard expressed a love of Irish poetry, I ordered books sent down from the city to our tiny village library. I studied a picture of Maud Gonne in a biography of Yeats. "The most beautiful woman in Ireland," it was captioned, "devoted to her politics, her land."

But not to Yeats, I learned. Nevertheless, I slit the picture from the book with my seam ripper. (This vandalism of library property may dismay you, but have you never been indiscreet in such a singularly petty way?) I had her picture taped to my ice-box when the letter I had been anticipating arrived from Mr. Dizard.

I knew it would contain the physical description I had requested the previous Monday. Mr. Dizard's letters were composed with mine before him. I knew this, for I kept a carbon of each one I sent. It was clear he responded to mine using my questions and descriptions to chronologically set down his reactions and opinions.

He would perhaps have read the book I said I was enjoying. He would say some few words about the weather in the western part of our shared state. And he would most certainly describe himself. I didn't doubt he would be truthful — not effusive with his detailing, but certainly accurate. As steadily as my hand now traces sharp lines on smooth stone, that day my unsteady fingers unfolded the light yellow pages:

... I am glad you took the initiative to inquire about my appearance. I feel, as do you, that "our outward veneer is but a case harboring our true selves." I also agree that an exchange of photos is unnecessary. It might even be, as you suggested, a bit calculating. I am comfortable with the imagined portraits descriptions will give, although I do hope, Miss Adelie, that we will have an opportunity before spring completely thaws our landscapes to compare our speculations to reality. But more on that in my next letter.

I am just under six feet. I am a bit thick through the shoulders (it runs in the family), not as trim as I used to be, but still fit.

As I've mentioned previously, I wear reading glasses. Though more and more gray creeps into my naturally dark brown hair, I am
thankful that I still have a full head of hair. I've always felt my nicest feature is my hands, though my mother used to insist my eyes, a rather unusual mustard shade, were my crowning glory.

I do have my own teeth, if you'll pardon the assumption that this might be an area as we straddle middle age where the body first shows signs of weakening. I look forward to your reply, as always, but also in anticipation of the description of yourself.

Warmly yours,

W. Dizard

Well, what was I to make of that? I read and re-read those lines. What was "just under six feet"? What, pray tell, was "not as trim"? And those thick shoulders—was he a luggish sort? As for his having mentioned teeth! Still, as I stared at the paper then out at dark clouds gathering above the ocean, I knew Mr. Dizard sounded acceptable. He sounded really very nice.

Oh, what use was it, I thought, and I brewed myself a pot of peppermint tea, for I felt a headache coming on. Why did I do this? What instinct made me eradicate any hope of being able to meet him? My response was as vivid as his had been vague, but where his was I'm certain an effort at accuracy, mine was patently false.

I stared wanly, sipping tea, at Maude's picture—trim and talented—then added five inches to my height as I replied to Mr. Dizard. The wind picked up; a draft rattled the prisms strung along my window. I transformed my short-cropped hair into a long mass of auburn curls, I discarded ten pounds. I lengthened my fingers.

What was my obsession with the extended form? At least I left my eyes the dull shade they are, though I called them "sea green." Do you smile at me now? The account of my behavior is not a pretty one. You will find these birds beautiful when I am done with them. . . .

I designed my letters like flower arrangements, with my O.E.D. and Bartlett's by my side. If he mentioned having been to a play, I read the script, studied reviews and criticism of it, then synthesized my discovered details into an aside: "So glad you were able to see a new production of 'Doll's House,' but don't you find Nora's slamming of that door artificial? Of course Ibsen had her stay in the original ending then changed his mind as he was walking one day. But I tell you what you already know, Mr. Dizard. . . ."

Impressed, he confessed he hadn't known that at all, that indeed he had again been quite affected by Nora's departure, but now I had termed the exit artificial, he had begun to question it. He thanked me for an insight into an old favorite.

So it became another of the barriers, this research of mine, his admiration. How could I release myself from expectations I had nourished? Why did I negate, through unsolicited passages to one who seemed earnest and harmless, any chance of our ever meeting? He began to ask repeatedly if I would meet him halfway between our towns at a "marvelous restaurant tucked away in the hills."

I stalled, fretting, while sun lingered longer on my table and the first wildflowers dotted the marsh. If he has come to love me, as he so often alluded, would appearance matter? Perhaps he had forgotten it, but no: he had responded, "I knew you must be tall."

What if I told the truth, confessed my weakness for fantasy and asked forgiveness? I was afraid to test it, afraid to chance even a conversation. Even that was bound to be a disappointment "in the flesh." Yes, he might search for my face and form in vain at that appointed restaurant, even if I were seated at its entrance. And he would surely react by bored dismay to my stilted efforts in communication. No,
he would see nothing redeemable, hear nothing memorable during a few hours in the company of one so utterly forgettable, one to whom nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened.

I had to find a way to end it. As much as the stark days without his letters would pain at first, they were preferable to meeting Mr. Dizard, to enduring his certain rejection, his disapprobation. Besides, I'd been alone. But how to do it, how to close it off . . .

The shape of the flamingo is becoming simpler to draw. I need to do less erasing of their webbed feet, their fluffed forms atop spindly legs. Even the S of their necks is becoming more natural. The bent bills were tricky, and I need black paint for their beak tips. I shall, as I have said, create diversity by varying their poses. Is it possible I might accomplish something which approaches art?

It was in concocting my final untruth to Mr. Dizard that I became interested in the flamingo. I decided I must tell him I was moving somewhere. I searched for a destination, flipping the pages of National Geographic, indifferent to the lushly tinted photos and to the cries of osprey who once again visited my marsh, presaging spring.

Fringing one of the pages devoted to some South American country was a photo of a colony of flamingoes. Part of the legend read, “Grouped up to 1,000 members, these birds live 15 to 20 years, sometimes longer in captivity.” I stared at their fiery mass of feathers, at the syrupy swirls of their necks. That night, I dreamt I was asleep under bright stars, that the flamingoes’ wings covered my face like mammoth rose petals.

I decided I would say I was moving to South America — nothing more specific. That evasion would prevent his tracing me. But then I wasn’t really leaving, I reminded myself . . .

Dear Mr. Dizard,

I know what I must say will at first upset you. If I’ve committed a wrong, it is one of omission, a silence I’d hoped would spare your feelings. Events beyond my control now dictate that I reveal the one fact I wanted never to mention. I must first then, Mr. Dizard, tell you I have been married.

Some years ago I answered an ad for a governess—even then I read the personals. A widower in South America who operated a flamingo ranch wanted someone to teach his daughters English. After the checking of references on my part and credentials on his, I was given the position.

Soon I began the only real adventure of my life. Portions of that long ride are still vivid: a man on the Chicago platform was dressed all in white—all about him looked smudged, soiled. He stood still as dark shapes rushed past. He didn’t board our train. There were moments last winter when I imagined you were he, that when we met I would recognize that man who had stood so separate at the depot.

Once there, I found the widower polite, his daughters obedient students. Even the acres of flamingoes had their attraction, though I couldn’t solve the riddle of their “imprisonment.” True, there were fences, but the birds could fly. Finally, I asked Señor de Garanza why they returned each evening.
He tapped his chest with his index finger; I could hear the light thud of his finger against his breastbone. "Senorita Adelie, I will tell you the secret," he said, leaning toward me. "Their wings tell them they can fly, yes. But in their hearts, here, they know this is their home. Just as you, you know this is home now, yes?"

Soon after, we were married. That same week the daughters were sent to boarding school. I wept, though I knew I had taught them well. It was a long while before I admitted my grief had little to do with their departure.

I had married the wrong man. I could not bear my life with him, though it was so horrible to consider telling him that for a while I stayed. In a way I was like Ibsen's Nora: acting out an expected role.

Near the anniversary of my first year there, a terrible disease afflicted the flamingoes. Their colors faded and they began to molt. Feathers were everywhere; they blew mournfully across the fields, drifting along fences in tangled mounds.

While the Senor was in the city consulting a veterinarian, I flew away. Yes, I fled north, leaving the poor Senor with his acres of naked, despondent flamingoes.

I do not reveal this with pleasure, Mr. Dizard. His daughters contacted me when he died recently. Yes, I am going back to them. The flamingoes are gone. His daughters tell me their father never ceased mourning them, or me.

Perhaps I'm the woman first conceived, one who ultimately cannot leave. In any case, I shall live out my days in South America. Forgive me, please.

Very truly yours,
Adelie

For a fortnight I stayed in my cottage after I had mailed the letter. I composed dozens of others to Mr. Dizard, sometimes getting up in the night to write a new version or to rip a recent one to shreds. In most of them I apologized for the temporary, quirky humor of the one I had sent, closing with the suggestion we set a date for our rendezvous. On one sheet I simply wrote, "Look. It has all been lies. I am not like that at all. Can we begin again?" I discarded them all.

Finally, I had to do it: I collected my mail at the post office. On the three letters Mr. Dizard had sent after receiving my goodbye, he had emphatically printed, "Please Forward!"

He had used new stationery; the envelopes were thick—flat gray with a steel gray border. They were all of a kind: urgent, understanding, logical. I was pleased that my past had not deterred him. A ridiculous relief, I prompted myself, since it was not my past at all.

Then his letters stopped, and I knew he believed me lost to him. He had given up. As surely as my budding bulbs were thrusting toward the sun, he would not write again. I was haunted by a vision of my imagined birds turning ineluctably from the beautiful mountains as dusk dimmed their view. It was then that I decided to paint the porch.

You have little sympathy for me, I'm sure. I don't resent your cynicism. Yet I wonder, as I kneel here coaxing the birds to materialization beneath my brush, what you would do with my existence, or what you have done with your own.
But mostly I paint. Soon my completed flamingoes will be splayed across these tiles. They will suggest summer, whatever the season. Their clustered forms will capture a wedge of sunset. Night will wash across them, transparent, harmless. When I am sleeping, with a silent flutter they will lift away. A blaze of wing will shadow my eyes. I will dream of pink flames.

Deirdre Callanan