

The Swan Thieves
A Novel by Elizabeth Kostova

For my mother
la bonne mère

You would hardly believe how difficult it is to place a figure alone on a canvas, and to concentrate all the interest on this single and universal figure and still keep it living and real.

Édouard Manet, 1880

Outside the village there is a fire ring, blackening the thawing snow. Next to the fire ring is a basket that has sat there for months and is beginning to weather to the color of ash. There are benches where the old men huddle to warm their hands---too cold even for that now, too close to twilight, too dreary. This is not Paris. The air smells of smoke and night sky; there is a hopeless amber sinking beyond the woods, almost a sunset. The dark is coming down so quickly that someone has already lit a lantern in the window of the house nearest the deserted fire. It is January or February, or perhaps a grim March, 1895—the year will be marked in rough black numbers against the shadows in one corner. The roofs of the village are slate, stained with melting snow, which slides off them in heaps. Some of the lanes are walled, others open to the fields and muddy gardens. The doors to the houses are closed, the scent of cooking rising above the chimneys.

Only one person is astir in all this desolation—a woman in heavy traveling clothes walking down a lane toward the last huddle of dwellings. Someone is lighting a lantern there, too, bending over the flame, a human form but indistinct in the distant window. The woman in the lane carries herself with dignity, and she isn't wearing the shabby apron and wooden *sabots* of the village. Her cloak and long skirts stand out against the violet snow. Her hood is edged with fur that hides all but the white curve of her cheek. The hem of her dress has a geometric border of pale blue. She is walking away with a bundle in her arms, something wrapped tightly, as if against the cold. The trees hold their branches numbly toward the sky; they frame the road. Someone has left a red cloth on the bench in front of the house at the end of the lane—a shawl, perhaps, or a small tablecloth, the only spot of bright color. The woman shields her bundle with her arms, with her gloved hands, turning her back on the center of the village as quickly as possible. Her boots click on a patch of ice in the road. Her breath shows pale against the gathering dark. She draws herself together, close, protective, hurrying. Is she leaving the village or hastening toward one of the houses in the last row?

Even the one person watching doesn't know the answer, nor does he care. He has worked most of the afternoon, stroking in the walls of the lanes, positioning the stark trees, measuring the road, waiting for the ten minutes of winter sunset. The woman is an intruder, but he puts her in, too, quickly, noting the details of her clothes, using the failing daylight to brush in the silhouette of her hood, the way she bends forward to stay warm or to hide her bundle. A beautiful surprise, whoever she is. She is the missing note, the movement he needed to fill that central stretch of road with its dirt-pocked snow. He has long since retreated, working now just

inside his window—he is old and his limbs ache if he paints out of doors in the cold for more than a quarter of an hour—so he can only imagine her quick breath, her step on the road, the crunch of snow under her sharp boot-heel. He is aging, ill, but for a moment he wishes she would turn and look straight at him. He pictures her hair as dark and soft, her lips vermilion, her eyes large and wary.

But she does not turn and he finds he is glad. He needs her as she is, needs her moving away from him into the snowy tunnel of his canvas, needs the straight form of her back and heavy skirts with their elegant border, her arm cradling the wrapped object. She is a real woman and she is in a hurry, but now she is also fixed forever. Now she is frozen in her haste. She is a real woman and now she is a painting.