The Great Imitator

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In 1879, Jonathan Hutchinson delivered a speech on syphilis to the British Medical Association. He dubbed the disease the Great Imitator for its propensity to mimic the symptoms of many other diseases, including smallpox, psoriasis, lupus, and epilepsy.

I am a disease. My very existence poisons my father’s life. The circumstances of my birth are as unspeakable as the name of the affliction that is slowly eroding his body. Look at how Manet, this man that I have been taught to call my godfather, my parain, cringes as I help him with his stylish dress. I reach my arms about him to tie his cravat, and he shrinks away from my almost embrace.

Although I have been a financial broker for years, when I make my regular visits to my parain’s apartment, I am still relegated to being his body servant, dressing him for his evening forays and often accompanying him. Tonight he is going to a demonstration of some dubious new cure for the pox, the disease that everyone knows about but that polite society chooses not to acknowledge. So, who better to accompany the artist to this soirée than Manet’s other secret? I, his enfant naturel.

When I am through with my parain’s toilette, I stand back from him so that he can examine himself, standing alone, in the cheval mirror. Ever since he suffered that sudden paralysis outside his studio four years ago, he does not like to see himself alongside young men. With the help of the building’s garlicky concierge, Aristide, I had scooped the artist off the sidewalk. He has resented poor Aristide’s good health and, I daresay, mine, ever since. Young men, healthy men, remind my parain of all that he has lost.

His disintegration is most painful because it is public. For him, there have always been two lives, that of the private man, with all his needs and frailties, and that of the dazzling, handsome, and witty public man. It is shameful for him when the lives become muddled. Last week, I handed him the Paris Illustrée. To accompany an article on le beau monde, the journal had printed an engraving of the thirteen-year-old portrait his friend Fantin had painted of him. It was the portrait once dubbed “the blond, the smiling Manet,” the one where he looks as fresh as a rain-washed morning. My parain took one look at the paper, then shuffled over to the grate and stuck it in the fire. “That’s a cruel joke,” he said.

The night smells of autumn, coal smoke and wet leaves. We ride in a hired cab beneath the streetlamps. To break the silence between us, I whistle a tune.
Manet must know it. My parain was once a great walker, a boulevardier who could tramp half the streets of Paris in a day. He would have heard this ditty while strolling past a group of bandy-legged sailors or under a builder’s scaffold. It is in a register that even the roughest voice can reach.

His reaction is not what I expect: he sings. “But who gives a damn if you get syphilis so long as you get laid?” He chuckles at the low lyrics. “Leon, never base your life on the foolish advice of a street song.”

His paternal tone insults me. It is late in the day for him to play the role of father. I am thirty years old and a bachelor, but no saint. This man of the world concerns himself so little with my life that he never guesses how I take precautions: frequenting only the government inspected brothels, and after release wrapping my penis in silk soaked with wine and shavings of wood from the guaiac tree.

The carriage stops in front of a massive apartment that was built probably twenty years ago during Haussmann’s heyday. Its gray stone weeps with rain. The conservative architecture gives no clue as to what will go on inside. What, pray tell, will cure the pox tonight? Mercury pills? Injections with serums derived from guinea pigs? A new diet?

My parain grabs my arm as he steps out of the carriage, then slides his bad leg under him. As I bang the door’s iron knocker, I can feel his sickly body shivering. We are shown into a sitting room that is crowded with potted palms and silent men in topcoats. Once my eyes adjust to the glare of the yellow gas light, I see that the room is full of the usual crowd: the infirm and their hired lackeys.

Like Manet, most of the diseased lean heavily on canes. For them, walking sticks are no mere accessory. Standing, these men favor one leg or the other, and, when seated, their afflicted legs assume curious wooden poses, or thump the air frantically. One man, with a face as red as his hair, reminds me of an Irish Setter scratching for fleas. I think I know him but realize that it is only his eyes that are familiar. The redhead has the drooping lids and dilated pupils of a morphine addict.

For a few of the other occupants of the room, the malady has taken a different route and traveled up the spine to the brain. These invalids have beads of moisture at the corners of their lax mouths, and they stare off into the distance with looks of unfocused fury. I wonder if these men have forgotten the causes of their anger. Perhaps, I think, they are unable to remember how to wipe the unhappy expressions from their faces, just as they are incapable of wiping the spittle from their mouths. The Judge, Manet’s father, ended like these old men, angry and insane. His family propped him up in a chair with his red ribbon of the Legion of Honor pinned to his chest, and for twelve years, Manet used this incontinent puppet’s displeasure as an excuse to not marry my “sister”
Suzanne. A plump Dutch woman who had been hired to teach the artist and his brothers piano was hardly a fitting match for the eldest son of the syphilitic judge, Auguste Manet. Is mad Auguste still clenching his jaw in that censorious manner in his grave, thinking of his son’s marriage to this commoner? Or does his skull smile with the knowledge that when Suzanne and the artist finally married, I was eleven years old, too old to be legitimized without setting tongues wagging?

Tonight, all of the ill, sane and insane, avoid a strange piece of equipment that waits in the center of the room. The thing is composed of two evenly spaced, high metal bars. Suspended from the bars and attached to a winch is a leather contraption that resembles a pony’s harness.

A short, bald man with an immaculate white goatee enters the room and steps up to the machine. He claps his hands officiously, as if he must cut through chatter to get our attention. “Thank you, gentlemen, for coming to witness the miracle of science that is known as the Seyre Suspension. In case after case, no treatment has proven to be more efficacious in the eradication of disease. May I have a volunteer to demonstrate this marvelous device?”

There is not one raised hand in the room, and a bit of nervous laughter travels among the sentient.

“No one?” A look, too stern to be called disappointment, crosses the bald doctor’s face. “Not one of you ready to be cured?”

Gradually, a gray-haired codger who looks quite out of his mind is prodded towards the machine by an earnest young man. “My father will try,” the young man says.

The father, who is perhaps not as mad as I had guessed, tries to claw his way through the assembled crowd to the door, but two thugs in white jackets grab his shriveled arms and lift his jittery body into place below the terrible machine. With mechanical speed, the thugs fasten the strap of the harness underneath the victim’s chin and begin to winch his body into the air. The old man’s body, suspended only by the chin, does a kind of hanged man’s jig. His feet struggle to find purchase in the empty air below him. The doctor with the white goatee explains that the Seyre Suspension is working, realigning the old man’s spine in a most salubrious manner.

As the victim’s face turns red and his eyes cloud up with tears, the son who has inflicted this punishment on his old man winces. “Isn’t it time that my father is set down now?”

“No. No. The procedure’s healthful effects are only beginning to be felt. Four minutes, five minutes will do your father a world of good.”

To distract myself from the suspended man’s liver colored jaw and bulging eyes, I watch my parain’s face. Manet appraises the spectacle, absorbing each
grunt of anguish, each twitching limb. Once when my parain was painting a Christ with angels, I heard him say that no image, heroic or erotic, could ever measure up to the image of pain. “Pain. That’s the core of humanity. That is the poem,” he rhapsodized. I doubted him then. I’ve always felt that the only pain that the artist appreciates is his own. To me, even Manet’s wounded Christ looks curiously like a self-portrait.

Certainly my parain has never sensed my pain fully enough to come to my rescue. I suppose people think he is generous. There was the little apartment he rented for my “sister” Suzanne after I came along. There was my tuition as a boarder at the Institution Marc-Dastes. And yes, when I was a lonely little boy there, I did long for Thursdays and Sundays when my godfather, the radiant Manet, would climb the school’s marble staircase to take me ice-skating in winter or to the park in summer. But what about that time in the park when the music played—the day with his mother, and Suzanne, and a hundred other people and two cruel little girls in summer dresses? The girls were beautiful in their dresses with the short puffy sleeves, and I played with them happily for a while, until they asked me who my father was. I still remember the way I suddenly became red and panicky. I knew that my last name was Leenhoff, like Suzanne’s, but I had no idea about my father. I had been told he was in Holland, but I had never met him. Noting my confusion, the girls began a chorus of teasing. I picked up a piece of gravel and threw it. The stone hit the blond girl on her arm. The sting of the impact made her stop her teasing, but the blood, appearing so sudden and scarlet next to her white dress, made her cry. I ran away from her wailing. I ran to the first comforting presence I set eyes on, Manet in his glossy top hat. I rushed towards my parain’s circle of light, but the instant I came near, he pushed me aside into the arms of his mother. From Mme. Manet’s lap, my teary eyes noted that the artist’s hands held paper. He had been sketching the awful girls the whole time. And when Manet’s mother finally dried my eyes and set me down onto the ground with a reprimand, he sketched that, too. Twenty years later, his canvas Music in the Tuileries, forces me to relive that day again and again. In a sense, that moment when I was out of tune with the rest of humanity, in torment while the rest of the world seemed to be laughing, became the signature of my life.

As for this latest poem of pain, the spectacle of the Seyre Suspension, it is a distended five minutes before the insane old man is reeled down from the heights and the harness is removed from his chafed jaw. His abused white body falls to the floor in a quivering heap. The victim’s son hovers over him. Why is it impossible for me to imagine myself fluttering over Manet’s body, the tails of my gray coat spread like pigeon wings? If this foolish son’s love for a father was
able to evince such a demonstration of pain, what would the confused mass of emotion I hold for Manet unleash?

Summer passes in a blur of shower baths and trains. On Friday afternoons, I leave my brokerage to ride the rails out to Bellevue where my parain is taking the water cure.

It is a wet summer, and the rain makes Manet peevish. He hasn’t the strength to paint, and Suzanne’s clucking presence annoys him, so he writes letters to his many female admirers. The missives to his old friend Mery Laurent, the voluptuous and scandalous actress, are long and, I suspect, confessional, while the dainty notes that he sends to the debutante Isabelle Lemonier are filled with flirtatious rhymes and sketches. He asks me to mail them as if I am too stupid to sense the slight these attentive letters contain towards Suzanne and, by extension, to myself. I slip them in the post and feel that I have become my syphilitic father’s panderer.

But the water cure, the point of Manet’s visit to Bellevue, is by far the most undignified aspect of the summer. It consists of a succession of hot and cold showers and pummeling massages designed to root out every ill. But my parain complains so much about the rough treatment meted out to him by the rural attendants at the spa that I drape a towel over my arm to see to his comfort myself.

The baths have the atmosphere of a sterile, white-tiled cave. The air is clammy, and the voices coming from the showers have the quality of the ocean trapped in the chambers of a shell. A Russian lets out an exasperated cry, followed by a hoarse laugh. Dull thwacks come from a room where a valet massages the blue-tinged skin of his master. The wheels on a passing bathchair need oiling.

It is safe to concentrate on the sounds. It is the only way to block out the distressing whiteness of my parain’s body. There he leans with his forehead against the shower wall, looking twice his fifty years. I despise the way this cure makes us so intimate. I despise my growing familiarity with his naked, weak body. His pale, twig-like left leg horrifies me. And even though I make a point of focusing on the swirl of his thinning hair around his scalp, I feel my eyes continually drawn to his sex, searching the shriveled member for a trace of the old chancre that marked the start of his disease. When did he catch it? When he sailed to Rio as a young man? It is so convenient to blame other countries for our diseases. We French call it the Italian Sickness while the Germans call it the Spanish Itch. And long ago, it was even known as the Canton Rash.

“Help me dry off.”
I kneel on the wet tiles, and Manet gives me a dismayed look. Is it the way the knees of my trousers are suddenly sodden or is it my trousers themselves that have provoked him? I suddenly see that the check of their houndstooth is much too strident. Thinking how Manet would never own such a hideous article of clothing, I begin to attack the artist with my towel.

“Not so hard,” my parain shouts. Then, realizing that he has been too rough on me, he tries to make a joke of things: “I worry that the louts outside might have taught you their technique.”

I laugh in response and hate myself for the concession. If I were to ally myself with the bumpkins and valets who hang about the spa’s courtyard smoking and flirting with the laundresses who wash the towels, Manet would only have himself to blame. With one stroke of the pen, with one public announcement that I was his son, he could have raised me far above such society. Other shamed fathers have done it. And such a gesture would have raised my aspirations above the world of business. I probably would have stayed on in school. Now, wouldn’t my parain suffer in the estimation of all his fine friends if I were to slip that small, almost imperceptible bit in rank, and become one of the rabble? It would be another item for the lovely ladies to whisper about behind their gloved hands.

Manet goes into the tepidarium for his next immersion, and I head for the courtyard. I join a group of men smoking, but their conversation turns as threadbare as their collars when I enter the cluster. There are class lines even between valets and failing stockbrokers. To ease the situation, I rest my lit cigarette on a windowsill and wink at the group of liveried men. “Would you like to meet a famous artist?” I say, as I remove my coat.

The men start guffawing in anticipation, and my athletic figure even attracts the attention of the laundresses. They pause in their work of washing the endless white towels used in the water cure, to watch me. I bow towards the prettiest of the girls and am pleased to notice a blush travel from the girl’s cheeks to her bare arms to her rough little hands.

Stepping to the center of the courtyard, I announce, “Voila, Monsieur Manet dances the pox polka.”

The audience titters as I transform into my godfather. My posture becomes stooped. The healthy light in my eyes grows dull. My smile turns downward in a grimace of pain. Suddenly my left leg slips out from beneath me. I look at the appendage with wild-eyed dismay. I use my left arm to push the leg back towards its partner, but then the leg begins jumping up and down as if it is operating a knifegrinder’s wheel.

My audience laughs and shouts encouragement. “Dance, dance, dance,” one young man chants.
I clutch the furiously pumping leg with both my hands. When the leg stops its apoplectic jig, I eye it mistrustfully. And, sure enough, the instant I remove my gaze from the disobedient leg, it begins its frantic dancing once more.

The girls shriek with laughter and their bosoms heave underneath their round-necked chemises. I end my performance with a groan and widen my legs slowly into the full splits of a tired acrobat.

With the sound of the riffraff’s applause still in my ears, I fold a fresh towel over my arm and go to fetch the real Manet.

In his paintings, my parain has twice cast me as a serving boy. He assigns me an equally servile role in his life. Consequently, I am the one to accompany him to the homeopath who prescribes the ergot. I am the one to mix up the nasty stuff, a fungus that smells like rye bread and dusty feet, and I am the one to feed it to him. Two months later, I am the first one to peel back the sheet of the bed to which he has taken and look at his left leg gone black and cheesy with gangrene. Finally, I am the one to arrange the amputation, inviting in the three butchers—Siredy, Tillaux, and Marjolin—to do the work. His screams are horrible. Two minutes into the procedure, I only want my parain to lose consciousness, so I don’t have to hear him any more.

The night after the operation, I take over the watch from Suzanne and sit beside my parain’s feverish and unconscious body. Manet looks like a corpse, his cheeks as sharp as elbows. His breath comes in wheezing gasps, and in an awful moment, I imagine killing him. Would anyone know if I were to place a pillow over those staccato breaths? In killing him, I would surely release my parain from the tight fist of pain, but it is doubtful that the murder would unchain me from the grip of feeling. I do nothing.

My parain is more famous than we knew. Abbe Hurel visits, telling me that the Archbishop of Paris himself has offered to administer the last rites.

“I do not see the necessity,” I say.

“But surely you see that Manet is dying,” the Abbe pleads.

“Perhaps. But he has scarcely been a believer.”

“Pain is often a path to the Father.”

The Abbe’s sentence strikes me like a slap. “If my parain shows any sign of desiring the last sacrament, you can be assured that I will call you. But as for suggesting such a thing, I can’t do it.”

The air in Manet’s room is swampy and breathtaking. The rot has obviously traveled beyond his leg. Although the April weather is unseasonably warm, he shivers. I do not light a fire for fear that the heat will intensify the abattoir stench of his body.
Seven nights after the amputation, while Manet is shifting in and out of delirium, I discover that my parain’s amputated leg has been left in the sickroom fireplace to fester behind an andiron. Did those foolish surgeons simply forget to dispose of it properly, or did they think that I, a mere godson, would feel nothing as I watched Manet’s dried out appendage fizzle and pop in the flames?

I cover my nose and mouth with a nearby towel and grab the swarming black mass with the fireplace tongs. The surprising weight of the limb causes me to drop it, scattering maggots on the tile mantle. I curse and delicately lift the limb again, this time depositing it into the coal scuttle. I sob with frustration and horror.

What am I to do with the leg now? I can’t simply wait to bury it with the rest of the artist in his casket. I’ve no idea how long it takes to die. And there’s no place to bury it here. Should I take the noxious thing on a train ride to the country to bury in the little family plot at Gennvilliers? If I leave it out on the street with the bundles of household papers and bottles, a dog will race off with it, or a ragpicker might stumble upon it and bring the police. I could force Marjolin to get rid of it. He posts a daily bulletin on the artist’s health at the concierge’s lodge for the gossipmongers that hang about in the street. But Marjolin would probably find some way to make the leg a public spectacle.

“Even now, even now, I wind up keeping your secrets,” I hiss at Manet. His figure, muffled in the covers of the sick bed, seems to shrink. “You can hear me then?” I say, walking over to his bedside. But there is no reply.

I build a fire and stoke it high. At two in the morning, when it is burning hot and blue, I place the leg upon it. Despite the macabre nature of the fuel, I find that the way the firelight dances on the walls reminds me of the cozy time we all shared in Arcachon. Suzanne and I had lived there and in Oloron-Saint-Marie during the siege of Paris. Even though I was old enough to be in the army, Manet had sent me away from the city, giving me the excuse that I must look after my “sister.” From his guard post on the Paris ramparts, he wrote Suzanne lovelorn letters, and, at the end of the war, he came to Arcachon. There, he painted us with loving, tender strokes as we read by firelight.

My parain—no, my father—is dead. I sit in a chair opposite his shrouded form and cry. For weeks, this chair has been my station. While the rest of the household and family, including Suzanne, shied away from his pain, retreating from him to protect their memories, I drew my chair closer trying to see into his heart. All my life, I just wanted to bear one undiluted feeling for Manet. I wanted to see him white: as my savior, as my father, as a great man of talent and
wit. Or I wanted to see him black: as the promiscuous syphilitic, the adulterer, the snob, the hypocrite, the critic. I wanted something simple from him, and he never gave it.

Now he is dead, and against all expectations, he has left me everything. Everything. More than I ever wanted. And less. And so my feelings remain shadowed, nuanced, and two-sided.

In the midst of my sobbing, I give a short mucous-filled laugh. It suddenly occurs to me that his art is the same. The critics complain that Manet is overly complex and confusing, that his paintings raise too many questions. A person goes looking for a picture of illumination and gets darkness, or looking for a painting of a pretty girl and gets a nude in a whorehouse. It turns out that simplicity was the one thing that was beyond my father’s talent.