



Woman Carrying Bags

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THE SUN PERCHED ITSELF ABOVE THE Capitol, and tufts of downy clouds playfully tossed shadows toward the Washington Monument. A light breeze blew, gently persuading the cherry blossoms to share their sweet fragrance with the tourists and locals who filled the sidewalks of the National Mall. Starlings, sparrows, and doves celebrated the bright spring morning with song as the doors to the various museums of the Smithsonian complex opened to admit the first visitors of the day.

From the south side of the Mall at 9th Street, Edna emerged as she did every morning, carrying her life in two tattered bags. She moved ploddingly, in measured cadence, her eyes fixed on the sidewalk ahead of her. Her dry, matted hair fell about her shoulders like black and gray straw. The tail of her dingy, blue cotton blouse hung out, masking a hole in the back of her dull brown skirt. Her shoes, two sizes too large, flopped and scuffed the ground as she continued across the Mall and up the steps to the National Gallery of Art.

One of the two security guards stationed just inside the heavy glass doors ignored Edna tramping through the rotunda. The other offered a quick nod as she passed. She progressed toward her destination with a determined pace, breathing heavily from her long trek but proceeding without hesitation until she reached the East Wing. There she paused momentarily, took in a long wheezing breath, and began her search.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Le Pont-Neuf, Paris*, 1872



She moved through the galleries with quiet reverence, her eyes no longer vacant and lowered toward the polished marble floor, but raised in vibrant awe to the masterpieces lining the walls. Each work of art was an old and respected friend; she knew them all and greeted them individually, sharing a silent memory with each as she passed.

When her eye caught Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Pont Neuf, Paris*, she became transfixed, frozen in space and time for several seconds. Her eyes never left the canvas as she crept to the bench in the center of the room, lowered her bags to the floor, and sat. A hint of a smile crossed her wrinkled, weather-worn face as she decided to spend her day here on the bustling Paris boulevard captured by the French Impressionist master over one hundred fifty years earlier.

Edna studied the painting, rejoicing in every tiny detail while simultaneously absorbing the essence of its grand view. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the museum began to fade away, the hum of voices comparing the styles of Monet and Manet dissolved into silence, and everything surrounding the painting vanished into darkness. *Pont Neuf, Paris*, gradually enlarged. The two-and-a-half by three-foot canvas began stretching outward until it appeared to cover the entire wall. It then expanded forward into three dimensions, enveloping Edna entirely and leaving her standing in the center of the crowded Paris bridge.

Edna observed the white puffy clouds suspended resolutely in the azure sky above her. The people surrounding her posed mute and immobile, paralyzed in midstride. Several horse-drawn carriages stood inert and hushed nearby. With a blink of her eyes the stillness and silence engulfing Edna exploded to life. Carriages clattered along the street, horses whinnying and snorting. The clamor of voices electrified the air, laughter, people chatting, vendors hawking their goods, an elderly gentleman hailing a passing carriage. A scruffy black and white dog raced past, barking and wagging its tail excitedly as a boy pursued, shouting and waving his arms. Water lapped against the stone bridge, punctuating the carefree giggles of two girls as they tossed bits of food to the fish in the Seine. Lovers promenaded

arm in arm, a policeman ambled along relishing his peaceful jurisdiction, an artist created charcoal sketches of the skyline.

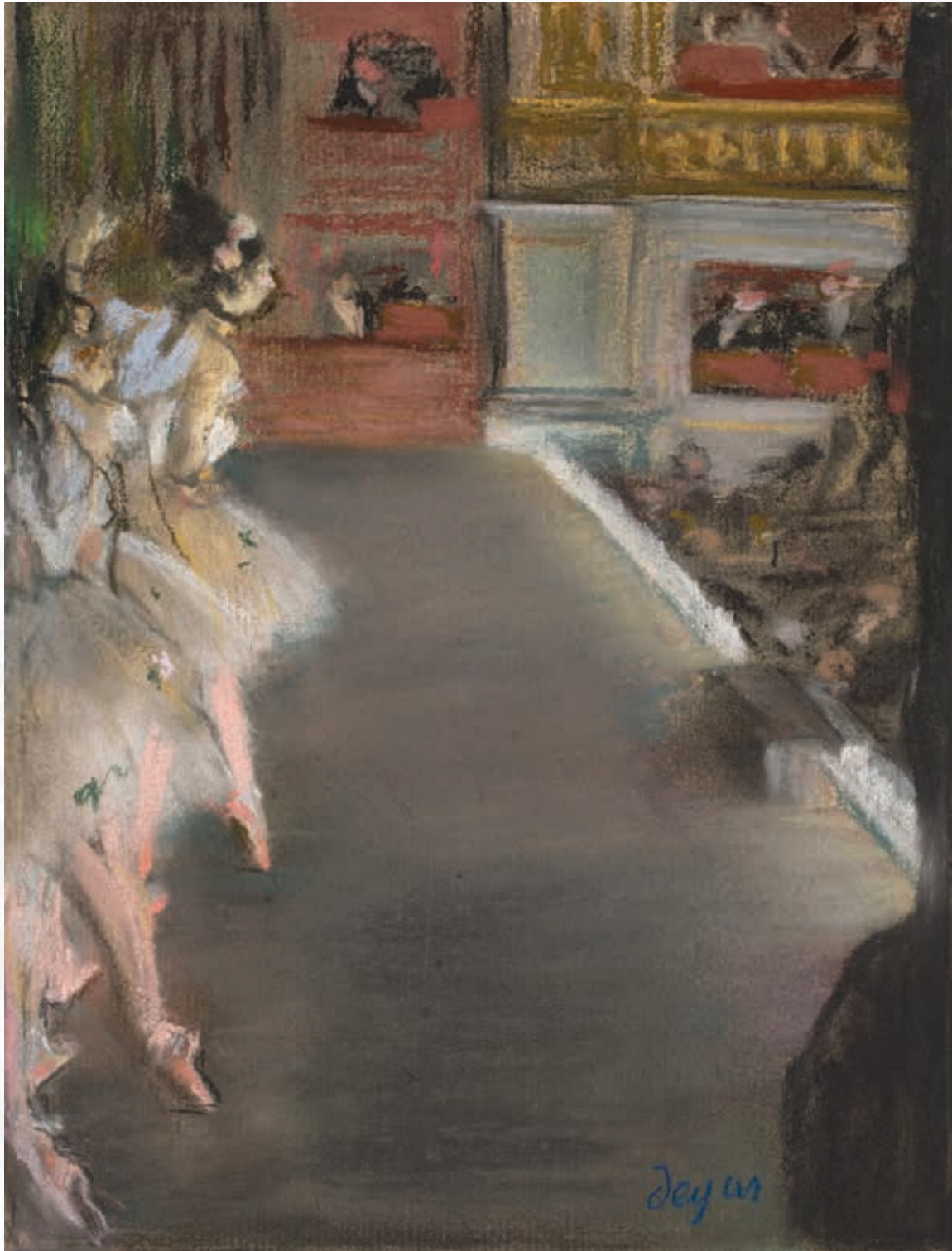
Edna turned and strolled past a sidewalk café bustling with the lunchtime crowd and worked her way toward the shops that ran parallel to the river. The scent of fresh baked bread lured her to the window of a tiny bakery on the corner. She paused, savoring the bouquet of tasty creations on delicate doilies artfully displayed in the window.

As Edna approached the door of the bakery, she caught sight of her reflection in the glass. What she saw whisked her breath away: a fine pastel yellow gown with an elegant blue satin sash fashioned in a large bow above the bustle, smooth white hair neatly drawn up in a loose bun, and an exquisite flower-bedecked hat framing the soft pink skin of her face. Her bright blue eyes, highlighted by laugh lines, danced with giddy excitement as she blushed then entered the bakery. Moments later, she returned with her purchase, a small flaky pastry filled with rich cream and topped with chocolate.

Edna spent hours walking along the streets, greeting passersby, sharing in the splendor and mystique that is Paris. In the late afternoon she bought a single white rose from a country girl with lovely auburn curls. As she took a coin from her dainty, silk drawstring purse and handed it to the grateful child, Edna's afternoon shattered.

"Get away from that horrid woman," hissed a housewife from suburban Baltimore as she grabbed her six-year-old daughter by the arm and yanked her away from Edna. In that instant, the sights, sounds, flavors, and aromas of Paris fractured and collapsed in a cloud of dust, and Edna found herself back on the cold austere bench in the gallery. The mother hurried her daughter away from the raised eyebrows of other nearby museumgoers while the youngster tried vainly to explain she was only looking at the strange woman. Edna winced as she raised her tired frame from the rigid seat, took up her belongings, and shuffled toward the front doors of the building. Once outside she wiped the perspiration from her brow then continued across the Mall and disappeared down Independence Avenue.





Edgar Degas, *Dancers at the Old Opera House*, c. 1877

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A gray overcast sky forged a dull, filmy canopy above the Mall the following morning. Edna appeared as she had the previous day except for the addition of two swollen scratch marks on her forearm, reminders of the tomcat that roused her in the middle of the night, apparently feeling his territory invaded by the sleeping woman. Nothing varied as she followed her daily path to the East Wing of the National Gallery and carefully selected the day's masterpiece.

She seated herself before *Dancers at the Old Opera House* and allowed Edgar Degas's tiny tableau to catapult her onto the gas-lit stage and whirl her in a series of pirouettes. The rich harmonies of the orchestra propelled her lithe body across the boards with swanlike grace. As she danced, Edna snatched brief glimpses of the scene around her: red velvet draperies, men in tailcoats with matching double-breasted

waistcoats, women in stunning gowns and long gloves, violinists frenetically piercing the air with their bows. A shimmering halo created by the footlights encircled the rapt audience that filled the opulent theatre to capacity.

"Brava!"

"Magnifique!"

"Can't she hang out in a shelter?"


The discordant sound of the man's voice threw Edna back onto the bench with such force that she gasped and struggled to regain her breath. She labored to lift her body from the granite slab and her bags from beside it. In an uncharacteristic act of bravado, she pivoted and silently confronted the man who had demolished her moment in the limelight, her face expressionless, her gaze steadfast. His disgusted snarl melted into uncomfortable embarrassment, and after an uneasy moment, he averted his eyes and left the room.



The next morning's blanket of murky fog snuffed out the nightlong thunderstorms that had drenched the capital city. Edna trudged toward the marble-columned edifice, her routine interrupted only once when one of her now frequent coughing fits ambushed her halfway up the steps to the entrance. Inside the rotunda, the usual harsh clumping of her shoes against the floor was replaced with a soft squishing. Her heavy, damp clothing dragged her downward, slowing her progress. She passed several rooms without pausing to acknowledge the artwork they held and made her way directly to Claude Monet's *Woman with a Parasol*.

Edna abandoned her chilled, aching body on the stone pew and surrendered to the windswept hillside in the radiant French countryside. A thin gauze veil fluttered across her face in the breeze, and she carried a simple white parasol to shade her eyes from the summer sun. Wispy featherlike clouds waltzed across the expansive blue sky. Orange and yellow wildflowers dotted the lush green landscape, creating a beautiful mosaic for miles in every direction. Her young son stood nearby in his crisp new sailor shirt and shorts, beaming at his mother from beneath a round straw hat.

Standing in the tall green grass, the warm sun on her back, the delightful fragrances of summer everywhere, Edna breathed in the fresh clear air and listened to the gentle whipping of her skirt. Her son suddenly shoved at her skirt, interrupting her peaceful reverie, and with a burst of giggles, bolted across the rolling field, daring her to follow. Edna let her parasol fall to the ground and chased after him. He eluded her grasp several times before she was able to pull him to her, lift him high in the air, and spin round and round, rejoicing in his squeals of pleasure. She set him down in the grass, then swooned and fell in a feigned faint. The boy, aware of his mother's jest, flung himself down at her side and began tickling her wildly.

Out of breath and dizzy with laughter, the two called a truce in their joyful romp and lay next to each other on the soft carpet of wildflowers. The boy snuggled against his mother and fell asleep the moment he closed his eyes. Edna cherished his carefree spirit and this perfect moment even as she understood the ephemeral nature of both. She held him close, watched him breathe, and stroked his soft brown hair before drifting into eternally peaceful slumber. 



Claude Monet, *Woman with a Parasol*, 1875

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