### Five Eyes Across

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### Five Eyes Across

**by SonnetCXVI**

**Summary**

AU in which Delphine is a painter who exchanges French tutoring for Cosima's posing as her artist's model. Delphine is recovering from a broken heart and Cosima helps her heal through friendship and the modeling of what real love looks like.

**Notes**

"Five eyes across" is a proportion that is used in drawing. The human face is approximately the width of five eyes placed side-by-side; the height of a human body is approximately seven-and-a-half "heads" tall.
Chapter 1

I

Delphine used to have a lover who liked to make love in front of a mirror. At first she thought that it was the picture of their bodies joined together that provoked this impulse, but she came to realize that it was just that her lover liked to see herself. They would sit on the floor in front of the mirror, Delphine in back with her lover tucked between her legs, and they would watch together as the woman’s fingers appeared and disappeared between her legs, piercing the dark red pubic hair, Delphine’s hands on her breasts. Delphine told her lover once that she would like to paint her hands blue so that they would be more prominent against her skin, so that she could compose an animate picture in which she would stand out in relief from the textures and planes that she could perceive only imperfectly in the reflection. It doesn’t matter how we look, said the lover. But Delphine felt this to be untrue. How it looked was everything.

She trusts her eyes more than any other sense and she finds truth in images. When she watches people, when she waits at a corner, when she looks out a window, she unconsciously composes into a single unmoving picture what she sees before her. She may compose picture after picture as the view changes, but she forms and briefly holds each one as a distinct composition. This habit is not the work of an internal camera that converts the transient into the inert. Instead she transforms what she sees into textures and shapes and swathes of color, the impression of a painting that flashes into her brain and disappears. She senses truth and beauty through this process, angled sun on the side of an abandoned building not an illumination of decay, for example, but an intersection of proportion and geometry and light. Those are the characteristics she sees in her mind’s eye and for her they are the truth beneath the real, a personal construct that exposes the foundational and essential.

Her reaction to human relationships is much the same: she parses the truth by what she sees. This is how it was with her lover. As Delphine watched in the mirror, the picture she saw was that of intimacy. The vulnerability of the open legs, the relinquishment of privacy, the intimation of trust: these components had the shape and proportion of affection. She supposed this lovemaking to be a living composition created only for her lover and her, and she felt privileged to observe it. She embraced and returned what she supposed it represented because what she saw in the mirror she read as truth, not trompe-l’oeil. She thought that their relationship was conjunction. She thought that it was passion. She thought that it was love, because that is what it looked like.

II

At night, in her studio, Delphine paints large abstract portraits of women whom she creates from her imagination. These women are usually voluptuous and Delphine poses them in various attitudes of provocative repose. Her paintings are filled with color, the women a dozen or two shades of orange and cobalt and a chalky, sea-foam green that she manipulates obsessively to preclude its looking too institutional. She is trying to evoke the idea of flesh, the instinctual, lizard-brain response that flesh provokes, without actually using the colors of flesh. What does the eye require, she wonders as she works, to recognize the truth in the composition?

Her studio contains more than two dozen large canvases that she has begun and stepped away from, most a variation of this idea. She goes back to these paintings over and over, setting aside one to pick up another, placing them in combinations along the studio’s walls, hanging them in various places in her loft or leaning them against the appliances or furniture so that she will come across them when she is thinking about something else. Sometimes she turns her canvases upside down on her easel to
stifle her inclination to dwell on the mechanics of composition, and she paints with the canvas in this position until she senses that her moment of thoughtlessness has passed. Often in the morning, she lies on her side and looks at whichever painting she has hung opposite the bed and thinks about the tangerine highlight she will place on the hip or the blue-green shadow that will deepen the contrast between the subject’s groin and her resting hand.

Although Delphine makes a living by painting she doesn’t make a good living. Trying to survive on art is full of uncertainty, and she spends a lot of time working to sell art instead of creating it. Sometimes she must take other jobs to supplement her income when she is unable to sell enough to live on. Her father tells her that she should paint as a diversion instead of a profession. She is, he feels, wasting her intelligence and excellent education on something frivolous. But she can’t give it up. She is compelled to paint. She has sacrificed comfort, security, and companionship for it. *Come home. You can paint here,* he encourages. *Don’t you miss Paris?* But she has art connections in San Francisco now and a studio that suits her. And … her ex is here. So she always declines.

III

It isn’t hard, Delphine has learned, to love someone who doesn’t love you. She’d met Isabelle in a gallery where she was trying to get a show, speaking with her first on the phone to set up an appointment with the owner and then in person when she went to supervise the installation. Isabelle was red-haired and full-figured, with pale blue, intelligent eyes and a straight-forward manner. She met Delphine at the door to let her into the gallery early on a Monday morning, and spent the next six hours with her hanging paintings and adjusting lighting. Dressed in a black turtleneck and jeans, she’d discussed knowledgeably, as they propped the paintings against the walls to determine placement, which paintings should be placed in proximity to each other and whether it mattered in which order patrons viewed them. Later she’d dragged around a ladder, popping up the steps to set the lights according to Delphine’s instructions. Eventually she’d grown too warm and, pushing her sleeves up her forearms and pulling her hair back in a messy ponytail, had suggested they sit and share a bottle of water. *Her flushed cheeks were lovely.* Delphine hadn’t had a serious relationship in some time and never with a woman, although she had slept with both women and men. But Isabelle brought something out in her that wanted to latch on, to gorge on the physical and intellectual voluptuousness that was offered without any hint of artifice. *She’s solid,* thought Delphine; *she is as she appears.* So when Isabelle had placed herself in front of Delphine, full of confidence and desire, Delphine had stepped right into her.

They’d gone to bed almost immediately and Delphine found herself surprised and delighted in a way that was completely unique. Delphine enjoyed sex but had found in her conventionally attractive lovers only conventional physical satisfaction. Rubenesque Isabelle astonished and excited her in a way that she hadn’t experienced before. Isabelle was unabashedly comfortable in her body and Delphine found that she liked the soft curves, the full breasts, and the feminine hips of this new woman. She was enamored of Isabelle’s pale, pale un-freckled skin, paler even than her own. And her nipples, so pale as to be almost the same color as her flesh, were a provocative visual, as though Isabelle’s nudity were a more profound, more naked sort of nudity. Delphine’s visual cortex had flashed like heat lightning the first few times she’d seen her unclothed.

They’d slept mostly at Isabelle’s apartment, which was casual and comfortable and contained several very nice pieces of art that Delphine admired. Isabelle made love to her everywhere in that apartment, on every surface, her personality reflected in her inclination to top, her willingness to talk afterward as much as Delphine wanted to, her desire to fuck Delphine so well that she was hoarse from crying out. She often took Delphine before she was unclothed, standing just inside the door or
bent over the back of the sofa, unable to wait for her to undress. Delphine found herself uncharacteristically and perpetually aroused, swept up in Isabelle’s advances, often wet and twitchy before she had even opened the apartment door. She was also often delighted, laughing deeply and frequently at her lover’s sardonic joking and talent for mimicry and feeling guilty about its unapologetic edginess. She was in love, and her senses hovered in a swirling, heightened agitation that provoked some of her best painting. Colors and textures became associated with sexual response, giddiness, and anticipation, and she painted frantically, expelling her surging emotions onto her canvases so that there was room for Isabelle to refill her. She began to think of permanence, everything she loved most in art and relationship converging for her in this love affair. Isabelle left her before she could speak of it.

IV

In the weeks after Isabelle leaves her, Delphine battles dread as well as misery, afraid she’s descending to the place that once nearly killed her. She hasn’t been this low since she was a girl and now I can bear this is the Shanti mantra she forces into her brain like a pin, needing it to bind her up but finding it too slick and sharp to find purchase. She is still filled with love for Isabelle, just as before, but now it’s clotted and thick, curdled by shock and hurt. Instead of lifting her in ebullience as it once did, it rises to gag her, bending her over as wave after wave of sadness rolls through her. She is unable to swallow or disgorge it. At home she is subdued, sleeping in fits of avoidance that gut her days. When she attends to her commitments she is exhausted by the struggle to appear untroubled and attentive, unintentionally projecting a fragility that suggests instability and undermines her ability to advocate her art. She navigates in public as though a pane of glass lies behind her tongue, holding back the pressure that coils and shifts around her larynx. She feels that if she opens her mouth too wide it will all be visible, the barrier and her barely-contained hurt. Even when tendrils creep around the edges to pool in her tear ducts and sinuses, which fill and spill over and refill, the flushing does nothing to lessen the weight of the whole. She is unable to paint for more than a few minutes at a time, and every painting is Isabelle, green and orange and blue.

V

As time passes she decomposes under the weight of her desire to be touched. Her physical life with Isabelle had been so intense that its loss is like a second, separate loss. She seduces a man she picks up in a coffee shop but can’t adjust to his masculinity and withdraws immediately when he says he wants to see her again. She casts about among her exes, searching for something brief, noncommittal and, truth be told, angry, but concedes its futility almost immediately. Finally, she just touches herself. It is supposed to comfort her, to assuage her grief, this feeling of her hand, any hand, moving over her skin. It is supposed to make her feel wanted, not a photograph of herself anymore but herself whole again, unbroken and vitreous after the scorching of Isabelle’s rejection. But self-comfort doesn’t feel like comfort. She mostly feels shame, shame that what was once done for pleasure is now her feeble consolation, shame that instead of wanting it she now needs it.

She always forces herself to come, no matter what it takes to get her there, and when she does, alone and panting, she covers her eyes and cries, her orgasm tinted by despair. She rises as soon as she can to yank up her pants and wash her hands. When it’s really bad, when she feels choked, she goes to her bed several times a day. She lies on her back and imagines her nipple pressed against the roof of Isabelle’s mouth or the pale, capable hand of Isabelle’s reflection moving in the mirror as she watches her. A time or two she sits in front of the mirror and recreates this image, staring at her reflection as she moves her hand between her legs. She hopes to see a picture of affection as she
once did, even if it is fleeting and incomplete. If only she can see some sort of self-love, her emotions will follow as they always have, won’t they? But punishment, not love, is the underpainting beneath the fleeting relief and through it all Isabelle’s ghost straddles her, poised to pour back into her the moment she finishes. *Oh God*, she sobs, *something must take this away from me.*
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Delphine begins to paint after Isabelle leaves her, but finds that she cannot adequately express what she is feeling.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who left a comment or a kudo. Reader response is manna.

Cosima doesn't appear in this chapter but she will be in the next one, so don't worry. The lovers will soon meet.

Thanks to Alex for her astute comments and suggestions. This story is the better for it.

I

Delphine mostly works at night, barefoot in ancient jeans and t-shirts that are covered with paint from various points on her artistic arc. When it’s cold she puts on wool socks, an old Henley, and a denim work shirt, also paint covered, but she can’t bear to work in shoes and no temperature drop will drive her to it. Her hair, longish, blond, and wavy, is usually clipped up and out of her way, exposing a slender neck and pretty ears, one of which has several piercings. Her hands are beautiful and expressive but she is not fussy about them. She doesn’t care if she gets paint or plaster or dye on them and she keeps her nails short, not bothering with polish. They are, after all, working hands. She wears a number of small rings and on her non-dominant wrist, a leather cuff and several smaller bracelets. She almost always dresses down, usually in jeans, and goes mostly without makeup. But, despite her relaxed style and her casual, friendly manner, she still exudes an aura of good education and wealth. There is nothing in her presentation to hint at her background except, perhaps, her carriage and her exquisite manners, but it is enough. The galleries see it in her and it gives her social currency and a kind of credibility that can’t be faked.

She lives and works on the fourth floor of an old coffee warehouse that she rents at a good price from an American colleague of her father’s. The light is better during the day but her creativity is more accessible at night and she almost always paints under warm artificial light that mimics sunlight, light that she has modified a number of times to give her what she wants. Some of the large windows along one side of her loft are covered in a decaying privacy film but others she has scraped clean to let in light. Since these windows face other commercial buildings, many of which don’t have windows on her side, she doesn’t worry much about being watched as she paints deep into the night; her living space is on the discreet side of the loft and when she goes to bed it’s very late so the buildings opposite are dark. It’s private enough.

She has lived in the warehouse for almost six years and it is now an extension of her tastes and idiosyncrasies, filled with the things that interest her: books, plants, scientific and medical tools, ceramics, glass, and of course, paintings. Everything is composed to please the eye, to make a visual pun, or to provoke thought, such as the little blue and yellow bowl filled with bisqued ceramic
fingers that she keeps on the bathroom shelf and gazes at while she brushes her teeth, or the line of marbles along her windowsill. Even her kitchen appliances have been modified: her refrigerator is orange metal-flake Kandy Copper, painted in a car paint booth by a hot rod guy who traded the paint job for a portrait of his abuelita, a design that eventually ended up in ink on his right bicep. Across from the fridge is her wooden kitchen table, painted in the fridge’s complimentary color, a vibrant blue. The balance between these objects pleases her, as does the contrast of her white plates against the table’s glossy surface. She always gets a little flush of satisfaction when she sits to eat.

II

Much of what she owns are objects that she has modified or fabricated and in the service of these projects and her creative, clever mind, she has taught herself a number of skills: rudimentary upholstery work, tiling, and paper and dye making, among other things. She has recovered her thrift store sofa herself, for example. It is now navy broadcloth and she has arranged on it several pillows that she has made out of interesting materials. One is black velvet, manipulated with bleach in several places to alter the black dye and remove the pile, a modern devoré of colorful bald spots. These flat places she has slit vertically to reveal a peachy under-cloth that bulges slightly because of the pillow’s stuffing; the design looks subtly like rows of labia arrayed on a dark sky. Another pillow is made from scraps embellished and overstitched to look like a box of chocolates. A third is made of sheaves of tea-stained newsprint, the edges rolled under in imitation of piping. She also collects dominos and mahjong tiles that she is gluing to the wall by the entrance, a portrait of her mother emerging beside the ochre door.

Her loft is open and divided between her studio, which is well-lit and carefully organized, and the apartment that is illuminated only by lamplight. There are industrial fluorescent lights mounted between the exposed ceiling joists throughout, but she seldom uses these as she finds overhead lighting depressing. They hang above her, dusty and ugly, and protest, the few times she turns them on, by buzzing and flickering until she flips them off in annoyance.

Her living space is more colorful than her studio, which is painted white to reflect light and to offer a neutral background for her paintings. Her private space is calm and surprisingly elegant, despite the fact that most of its contents are self-made or second-hand and despite the unfinished and blemished wooden floors, left untouched since the time they housed pallets of coffee beans whose fragrance lingers. It is a space created to delight, to evoke pleasure from common objects grouped beautifully and from unusual and pleasing combinations of color and pattern. She keeps it mostly neat and she makes her bed every day, a habit from childhood that leaves her uneasy if she ignores it.

III

Immediately after she loses Isabelle, Delphine is unable to paint. She is strung-out from bouts of crying and unhealthy sleeping and can’t muster the mental energy required to push paint around. Feeling guilty and stressed by financial concerns, she stands a few times staring at a blank canvas; the excitement and invigoration that normally emerge are silent. She is even less able to face work that she’s already started, partly afraid of ruining it and partly unable to recognize herself in it. She grieves that the piece of her that she loves the most, the piece that lives at the end of a paintbrush, has been subjugated to the piece that feels ruined. With the painter asleep she feels anesthetized and diminished, unable to heal herself in any context that doesn’t vent through her hands and eyes. Even gone, Delphine thinks, Isabelle is a succubus feasting on her, sucking something vital out of her. She struggles helplessly to wake or to shuck her off.
IV

In a couple of weeks, when she has recovered enough to collect herself, she forces herself to work, knowing that she will jeopardize the loft if she doesn’t. She approaches the easel like a lathe or a press. Grind this, pull that. Produce something. She doesn’t paint out of joy but out of necessity, having no financial cushion to carry her if she doesn’t work, so she chooses something technical, technique-driven, something she thinks she can sell: a study of wings. First a pimpled goose wing, plucked and laid out on a broken shutter with a Delft bowl and a ball of barbed wire. Then a small anatomical drawing of a bird’s wing in the style of Dürer, overpainted in greys and browns. Then a bald angel with bared teeth, wings pulled forward, awash in reds. The angel, painted last, looks more like her typical work and as she paints it, she begins to feel a tingle of her old self stirring. This is when she starts the portraits.

V

She knows she shouldn’t linger on Isabelle, shouldn’t spend hours every day analyzing a memory of her, but painting Isabelle is better than merely longing for her, she thinks. Maybe in painting her lover she will demythologize her. Or, perhaps from Isabelle’s likeness will rise an image of Delphine herself. She mostly hopes that in visual articulation she will find a grammar in which she becomes the subject of her own life once again and not its direct object: I paint Isabelle. Not Isabelle has left me. She picks up her brushes intending to capture that, the thing she has lost.

First she paints the Isabelle who rejected her, angular and defiant or turned away and unapproachable. The faces on these portraits are sometimes hidden and sometimes stare out of the painting as though daring the observer to comment. In one the defiant Isabelle sits straddling a chair, sex exposed, intentionally insouciant. In another, she lies on the floor, arm up to cover her eyes. In another she sits with back turned, head cast down and away. In most of the paintings Delphine exaggerates Isabelle’s mouth, her nipples, and her eyes, the physical things she most needs to purge. She paints her nude, unshielded, in an unconscious leveling of power. There is no pale skin on her canvases and no red hair. She paints in every color except the colors of flesh, bitterly mocking the failure of her sight by depicting Isabelle as she could not have been seen.

Delphine has never painted in this frame of mind before and these early portraits are partially untruthful; she’s not angry or healed enough to justify what she is creating. She is painting her relationship with Isabelle as she thinks she should perceive it, with herself triumphant and restored and Isabelle chastised. But over time she stops trying to conform what she feels to what she wants from the paint; she allows her feelings to break over her, crashing over her shoulders onto the flat white field before her. It is what it is, she thinks. Look at it and paint it.

Then she paints the Isabelle whom she loves, the provocative, sensuous Isabelle reclined with open legs, reaching to her from the den of their bed. Isabelle’s face in these portraits is often soft, eyes closed and lips slightly parted. Delphine paints what she thought she had seen in that face, what she had wanted to see. The acceptance calms her, the paint over time no longer such an unforgiving taskmaster. She allows herself to express how much she loves Isabelle and hopes, although she can’t articulate it, that the paintings will eventually release her from love’s grip, which has bled like watercolor into the tooth of her. If she can show what it all looked like, what Isabelle looked like when she looked like the face of love, perhaps she can wick this feeling away from herself and push Isabelle out through the bristles for good.

She fiddles endlessly with the colors, the poses, the shadows, and the textures; none of it is what she
wants. The canvases are everywhere. Her heart is everywhere upon them. But no matter what she paints, it isn’t right. It just doesn’t look like love.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Delphine starts to recover from her failed love affair. She begins tutoring and meets her students for the first time.

Chapter Notes

I promised Cosima and here she is. There will be more of her, lots more, in the next chapters. I'm sorry this is so expository. Just had to do some setup.

Thanks to Alex for reading and correcting. She always improves my writing. I can't, and wouldn't want to, do it without her.

And thanks to MlleClaudine and Ainhoa+64 for help with the French. You guys are awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I

The light is lovely the morning Delphine decides to begin tutoring again. She stands with a cup of coffee and watches the sunlight creep down the face of the red brick building opposite the windows of her studio. The bricks are old and soft looking, slightly rounded at the edges and a little chalky. The Metcalf Shoes sign, painted in bold blues onto the bricks almost a century before, has softened as well, now barely legible enough to nod at the memory of the female shift workers who had once poured onto the factory floor to produce shoes for the Good War. The sign is still handsome thinks Delphine, who gazes at it often and appreciates how the paint has released its pigments with the delicacy of a sigh. Now, as the early sun moves higher and its reach down the building’s face extends, the sign is about to be kissed. Delphine watches, composing little paintings in her head as light and shadow shift across sills and corbels and the sign turns from dove to delicate robin’s egg. Rectangle, parallelogram, rhombus. Cyan, burnt sienna. Add yellow, add black, add violet. It is the first time in a while that she has framed what she sees. She should be pleased, but she doesn’t realize she’s done it.

II

Delphine feels a shift as Isabelle moves deeper into the pleat between hurt and numbness. As her pain recedes to a place from which she can begin to look away, she starts to seep back into her life. She sits at the kitchen table one evening and pays her bills, which she had let slide in the wake of the breakup. She’s always paid punctually and she feels uneasy, even after she has caught them up. She wonders how she had dealt, to the best of her diminished abilities, with her previous commitments to the galleries but hadn’t paid her utilities. It feels as though she had huddled beneath a stencil, some things penetrating and others not, some responsibilities not only unattended to but entirely
unperceived. This level of obliviousness unsettles her now. To have been so lost, so cut loose from the careful and diligent part of herself is frightening.

She updates her financial spreadsheet, assessing how much additional income she must have and by when, if she is to be less vulnerable. She has already decided, after some thought, that she will return to tutoring if she can get enough students to make it worthwhile. Although she could take a part-time job, she doesn’t think she can handle a strict schedule yet; she still needs to step away from time to time, to visit the bed, to cry. If she tutors, she can control when and how much she must interact. She is going to teach French, as she has before, but also try a basic drawing class. French she will teach in a room at the library, one-on-one, but drawing can be done at the loft, all students in one class. She would like to have three students of French and up to four art students, although she doesn’t expect to get seven-students’-worth of response to her advertisement. Still, any supplement to her income and the controlled companionship of teaching will be welcome, no matter the number of students. She prays there will be enough to keep her from having to temp, which she doesn’t, in this frame of mind, think she can bear.

III

It is cool, as always, as she drives around to post her flyers. She hits the community college, the library, the rec center, and coffee shops and cafes in the neighborhoods adjacent to local schools. She also goes to UCSF; a long shot because its primary focus is on science and medicine and it’s a haul from the campus to both the library and her loft. Still, you never know. She contemplates going to Berkeley, but who would choose the commute into San Fran when tutoring is available on the Berkeley side? She’ll solicit there, she decides, only if she’s desperate.

She hangs her elbow out the window of her truck on her way home from the last stop and listens to the radio, switching between stations until she finds something that suits the sunny day. Although it’s very different from her Parisian home, she is fond of San Francisco and happy here; she enjoys living under its liberal, progressive stewardship. There is so much in the city to seduce the eye, so much to paint: the bay, Chinatown, the Castro area, the painted ladies, and the hills, the frustrating, iconic hills. Today, as usual, the pleasure of seeing the city only partly offsets her annoyance at the horrible traffic, and by the time she gets back to her neighborhood she is hungry and ready to be done.

She stops at a local Lebanese restaurant and gets falafel, which she eats in a turquoise plastic booth facing the storefront. The afternoon light, which streams in through the front window, is broken-up by numerous flyers taped to the glass and makes interesting patterns on the checkerboard floor. The dusty glass with its colored-paper embellishment and foreign lettering would be interesting to paint, as would the middle-aged woman who served her. Perhaps she will request permission to return and sketch. In any case, when she pays she asks to put a flyer in the window, which the woman does immediately, smiling shyly as she tapes it by the door.

IV

Now that she is able to stop focusing compulsively on Isabelle’s portraits -- has willed herself to abandon them until she can face at least some of them as objects to be sold -- Delphine considers how to proceed with her work. She inventories what is ready for sale. There are only a few things: three figures in pastel, the wing paintings, a small series of pear and fig still lifes, and some pieces that have not sold in the past. She contemplates how to match them with possible dealers or on-line markets.
More concerning is that she does not currently have any showings scheduled and has not, since Isabelle, been in contact with any of the galleries or dealers she has cultivated. Fixing this is a priority because in her line of work, there’s no quick, last-minute production. She has to prepare now for exhibits to be held six months from now. Being a planner by nature, she’s suited to this aspect of the art world and thrives on the sort of discipline required to prepare months in advance. She perks up as she begins her list.

She ponders which galleries and art exhibitors she should approach in the next few days. Certainly the gallery where Isabelle works is out as an option. When this thought pops into her head she immediately skitters away from it. *Fuck fuck fuck.*

After a moment she calms and tells herself that she’s got to stop being such a *trouillarde.* It’s so unlike her to avoid things in this way and she hates it, hates that she feels afraid because of someone else. She knows she can’t avoid any thought of Isabelle as a reaction to having no thought but Isabelle. But it’s not really thinking about Isabelle that she’s shying away from if she’s truthful. It’s the knowledge that she must return to the gallery and retrieve what was not sold. She’s going to have to deal with Isabelle in the flesh, to inventory the paintings and receive her final payment. Her gut clenches. *Putain! T'as du sang de navet!* She sighs. She’ll deal with that later, when she can think of it with less anxiety. Or when she’s so broke she can’t put if off any longer.

VI

The grad student is the last appointment of the day, arriving in late afternoon. She peeks in the door’s window when Delphine is finishing with the second AP French kid and immediately disappears. When Delphine opens the door to show him out, she is propped against the wall a little way down from the door, reading from a small, hard-backed book. Delphine’s first impression is of deep color
and poised energy. The painting is mustard, violet, brown, diffused light, layered patterns, curves. The woman, Cosima, looks up. The image evaporates, replaced by her smile.

Chapter End Notes

"trouillarde" coward

"T'as du sang de navet!" You have the blood of a turnip! (You're a wimp)
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Delphine and Cosima have their first conversation.

I

Delphine is not sure as she composes herself to approach Cosima if she is looking for much beyond income from her tutees this time around. She had become rather close to her last group, attending the graduation of one shy young man who had needed help keeping his French grade up in order to qualify for a scholarship. And she had corresponded for a few months with the girl to whom she had taught conversational French in preparation for a year studying abroad. She had enjoyed seeing Paris through the unjaded eyes of someone so enthusiastic about every detail and so thoroughly in love with everything French. This time Delphine is in a different place, unsure how exhausting two afternoons a week of close contact with strangers will be. She would like to find a way back to her friendly, energetic self by encouraging and challenging her students, by opening to them, but she is afraid that instead she will fail them by succumbing to the psychological stuttering she has been experiencing lately. She fears a failure of emotional stamina. Perhaps she will find something she needs by giving them what they need. Perhaps she will engage easily, as she used to. She hopes so. In any case, she thinks, she has forced herself into this pragmatic and necessary arrangement and she is now committed. All she can do is step on.

II

She has a moment to study Cosima before they meet. Her clothing is bold. It’s put together carefully; the color and pattern combinations can’t be accidental. The choices are clever, she thinks, full of cues and questions. Traditional color psychology -- which she knows but doesn’t entirely buy into -- says earthiness, intelligence, and strong emotion. The unconventional combination of motifs, the jewelry, and the dramatic hairstyle read self-confidence, humor, and … exhibitionism? It’s all very charming; intentionally so, she thinks. Perhaps a little too deliberate. Still, there’s a hook. The soft, threadbare cardigan is an incongruity and it nudges the effect from something crafted toward something interesting, perhaps authentic. This detail makes her glance stick.

Beyond her vivid styling and her general attractiveness, Cosima has an interesting sort of energy. She is clearly in good health; her beautiful skin, shiny hair, and slender, compact body radiate vitality and sexuality. Her musculature is defined, her calf and abdominal muscles appearing, even through her clothing, to be good enough for figure modeling. Her posture, relaxed and balanced as she leans against the wall to read, is composed. She doesn’t slump or flop as some do in that position but rests gently, as though she is momentarily embellishing the wall instead of being supported by it, a dragonfly on a reed.

When Cosima becomes aware of her, she pushes off the wall with an undulation of her torso. The movement looks like a ripple. The turn of the head toward Delphine, the blooming smile, the gentle closing of the book, and the roll of the hips forward to pull up the shoulders: a graceful, seamless sine. Once she is upright and turned, her energy pushes up into her face and out to Delphine, who feels it as wave, gently raising and lowering her like a little boat.
The minute she steps forward, however, Cosima’s elegance scuttles away. She has a bit of a goofy walk. She’s slightly pigeon-toed and her gait is an unexpected combination of forward and lateral movement. She’s all bends and loose-jointed momentum, hands, shoulders, and elbows animating in the few steps it takes her to close the distance between them. She seems to thrum with enthusiasm and for a moment before she remembers to be cautious, Delphine is buoyed by it.

She can’t help but be stimulated by the visuals, of course: so much color, so much movement, so much ornamentation. Delphine’s brain tingles with impressions that won’t settle. She sees herringbone, stripes, swirls, fluidity, weird angles, browns, reds, rings, undulation, and triangles, but unlike the hundreds of details she synthesizes every day, these don't congeal. She feels a little unsettled. Cosima in motion is too much to distill in just a moment. Still, her face is friendly and her smile seems sincere as Delphine extends her hand. *She will be interesting, this girl,* she thinks as their fingers slide together and squeeze.

“Enchantée,” she says, offering a polite smile.

“Enchantée,” beams Cosima.

### III

“Thank you for meeting me here. I hope the drive wasn’t inconvenient.”

“Oh, no prob. It wasn’t bad, especially on such a nice day.” They move easily toward the classroom, making small talk.

“You’re French. That’s totally a cool bonus. I couldn't tell from your emails.”

“Yes, I’m from Paris originally.”

Delphine opens the door, good manners forward as always, and waits for Cosima to enter. When Cosima steps inside she stops, undecided between sitting across from Delphine’s chair or beside it. Delphine gestures to the chair beside hers and turns her own chair sideways before sitting down.

“So, you’re a graduate student?”

“Yes,” says Cosima, who is unhappy with her chair’s orientation and scoots it, in a couple of little hops, to face Delphine more directly. “I’m a PhD candidate at Berkeley.”

“This is a long drive for you then. Could you not find someone closer?”

“I’ve lived in Fog City my whole life. I only go to the east side for school, so this is way closer for me. When I carried a full load, I'd trot cheerfully over the bay in the morning and crawl back every night with the other drudges.”

“I hate that trip,” says Delphine. “The traffic is wretched. I don't know how you faced it every day.”

“It sucked for sure, but I found ways to cheat. I crashed with friends on that side ... a lot ... so I wouldn’t have to go back and forth so much. Now that I’ve finished my classwork I mostly work from home, which is way better because I don't even have to get dressed, if I’m so inclined.” She laughs. “Which I often am.”

Delphine smiles. “Yes. Sleeping-in and not dressing are … ehm … perquisites …. perquisite? Is that right?” Cosima nods, eyes wide in surprise. “They’re perquisites of working at home. I agree.”
“I can’t believe you know that word,” grins Cosima, bending quickly forward with hands on knees and then popping back up in a gesture of happy astonishment. “Nobody uses that. Everyone says perk. I love that you know that word!”

“A benefit of expensive private education, I suppose,” says Delphine, shrugging a bit. “People who are taught a second language often learn a more formal, less idiomatic version than native speakers. I was probably taught a number of words that native speakers wouldn’t necessarily use. Plus, I’ve been here for quite a while so my English vocabulary is pretty good, I think.”

“I’ll say,” says Cosima. “So, you said ‘private education.’ Do you mean, like, parochial school or an all-girls school?”

Delphine shakes her head, lips compressed. Her demeanor closes in the time it takes her to inhale. “Boarding school. My father traveled for business and often took my mother, so they felt boarding school the best option for my education. I went from age nine until university.”

“That’s kind of a bummer. I would have really missed my family.” Delphine sees that Cosima is looking at her more more closely, perhaps to gauge just how bitter she is about this aspect of her childhood. She lightens her expression.

“I went to public school. Nothing fancy but it was still good,” Cosima continues. “Plus I learned a lot of things on my own just because I wanted to know stuff.” She will probably be a good student, then thinks Delphine.

“What does your father do?” Cosima asks.

“He’s an importer. Coffee and tobacco, mostly. Sometimes wine.”

“Wine into France? That must be a hard sell.”

“Vraiment. The French phobia about the dilution of French culture is very real, I’m afraid. But my father is good at what he does. My mother used to say that he could sell shoes to a flea.”

“My dad’s a dentist,” offers Cosima. She smiles extra widely, grimacing to show her bottom teeth. Delphine laughs.

“So, can you tell me more about why you want to study French? You need it for school, correct?”

“Yeah, I need two foreign language proficiencies in order to take the qualifying exam for my degree.” Delphine knows nothing about Berkeley’s degree requirements so is glad when Cosima elaborates.

“The qualifying exam is a three part oral exam given by five department members. The first two sections are comprehensive subject area exams on different historical fields and the third is essentially a defense of the dissertation topic. But I can’t take the qualifying exam until I’ve finished the language proficiencies, which means I can’t really start working on my dissertation. So, dominoes.”

She’s so obviously invested, thinks Delphine. She likes her better for it.

“Is French your first or your second proficiency?” she asks.

“Second. I’ve already qualified in Latin. My advisor thought French would be more useful to me than Spanish. German was the other option, but, German’s not for me, I don’t think.”

“You took Latin?” Delphine is surprised at this. “That’s unusual, isn’t it? Is Latin common in
"American schools?"

“No way,” says Cosima, wagging her hands in a *no, no* gesture. “Spanish, French, and German are way more common. Most kids only a take a foreign language because it’s required. They don’t really want to learn it. And Spanish and French seem easiest, so that’s what most people take. Americans expect everyone to speak English.” She looks at Delphine with a grin, likes she's pretending to share a secret. “But I took four years of Latin in high school. Totally a language nobody speaks, so maximum geek factor. But, since I’ve always been interested in etymology, *veni, vidi, vici* was my jam.”

“Is that what you are studying now? Etymology?” asks Delphine, whose interest is piqued.

“I’m a lit major, with an emphasis on American letters and a secondary specialization in linguistics.”

“That's an interesting field,” says Delphine sincerely. "Do you have a favorite writer? I like Whitman and Cummings.”

Cosima seems very pleased that she knows something about American literature. She looks like she's been given a bite of something delicious.

“I have lots of favorites. Sometimes I think all of it is my favorite.”

Delphine is struck suddenly by the graceful fluidity of Cosima's hands. They move in a kind of sign language for the hearing, coloring and emphasizing what she says. Delphine uses her hands when she speaks, as well, and she wonders if her own gestures have the same effect. She cannot imagine that her hands are half so articulate as Cosima's.

“My dissertation will probably be something about the effects of literary or personal isolation on American writers," Cosima continues, seemingly unaware that Delphine's attention had briefly shifted. "So I’m reading deeply in Dickinson, Thoreau, and the early American writers like Anne Bradstreet right now. My current favorite is Edward Taylor, I think. Do you know him?”

“No at all,” says Delphine. “Perhaps you will tell me about him sometime.” She is surprised that she has offered this small gesture of friendship. “But we should get back on topic, I think. Do you have any French at all?” she asks, retreating into the professional.

“Nope. I’m a neophyte, a total tyro beyond basic French food names and the common stuff.”

Delphine wonders if Cosima is teasing her or if *neophyte* and *tyro* are normal vocabulary for her. Despite her heavy reliance on slang, Cosima’s way of speaking strikes her as atypical and elevated. Perhaps it is a result of her interest in language origins.

“So, you must take a test to show proficiency? Is it oral? I’m not sure how to help you prepare.”

“It’s a written exam. They’ll give me some sort of document in French to be translated into idiomatic English. The same four or five tests are given to all grad students, so it won’t be department-specific. There’s no oral component. I mean, the whole point of the proficiency is so that you can read and do research using foreign sources, so they don’t care if you can speak the language. It’s not intended to prepare you for conversation.”

Delphine begins to think aloud. “So we need to focus on vocabulary and verb tenses. You’ll need to know how to make an educated guess about meaning based on context. I don’t think we’ll deal with slang but we should prepare you to recognize and understand common idioms.” She stops. “When are you sitting your exam?”
“In nine weeks,” says Cosima.

Delphine’s eyebrows shoot up. “How is this possible? Is that firm? You’ll have to do virtually nothing else for two months!”

“Oh, I’m used to cramming. No biggie. I’m scheduled to take my qualifying exam in late September so I have to pass this before then. Yeah, so nine weeks.”

Delphine scrubs her face with her hands for a moment and lets out a long breath. When she looks up she tries not to look too tired or strained.

“I don’t think once a week is going to be enough unless you feel confident doing most of the work on your own. I don’t mean to pry, but can you afford to meet with me more than once a week?”

“I’ll make it work,” she replies. “I didn’t come this far to bolo ten yards from the brass ring.”

“OK. This is the book I’d like you to get,” says Delphine, pulling a page from her note pad and writing a title. “Amazon should have it. Get the 2015 edition. That’s the one I have. In the meantime, memorize the numbers between zero and one-hundred and learn how to use them to count to one thousand. Also …. the names of the seasons, colors, and basic foods, such as apples, pears, chicken, etc. How to read dates, common forms of address, and …. ” She pauses. “Can you do this?”

Cosima nods.

“And articles of clothing and modes of transportation. All of this information is available on-line. French words have gender, so make a note of which nouns are male and which are female. I’ll discuss this with you next time.” She looks at Cosima with a cocked head. “Do you need me to write this down?”

“Nope,” she replies, tapping her temple. “Got it.”

IV

While Cosima is using the restroom, Delphine stacks her papers and books and straightens the chairs. Her time with the woman has left her with much to consider. Cosima is very larger than life. She’s so interesting to look at, she thinks. Beyond the obvious display of her clothing, her face is also thought-provoking. Her grin is huge, engaging, and filled with beautiful, even white teeth. Her lips are shapely, the bottom lip full and the top lip a pale pink cupid’s bow. Delphine’s eye, sensitive to detail, had been drawn to their unusual texture; they are marked with shallow vertical cracks that should telegraph dryness but instead are strangely sensual, like sleep marks, incongruous against the smooth plasticity of her olive skin. Her canines are slightly long and rakish-looking, an impression reinforced by the way she cocks her head slightly and leans in when she speaks, half inquisitive little bird and half charmer.

Unlike her mouth, her eyes are very much a part of her created persona. She applies her eyeliner in a distinctive cat's eye shape and reinforces this by wearing similarly-shaped glasses. The upward sweep of the frames draws the eye out, implying more pronounced cheek bones than is true. With her hair pulled permanently back into dreds, her glasses dominate her face; she’d had to look past them slightly to read her. Those glasses draw the eye away from her mouth, she thinks. Too bad. Her mouth is her best feature. Later, when she knows Cosima better, she will realize that this redirection of focus from her mouth to her eyes is intentional; it encourages redirection from the sensual toward the intellectual. Delphine will dwell on this visual trickery at some length in the
months to come, folding it and unfolding it into a number of interpretations. For now it is only a feeling, gone as soon as she has had it.

Delphine’s mind flushes when she finally synthesizes the picture. Her composition is: book pages, vellum, flocked wallpaper, and endpapers, torn into pieces, collaged, and overlaid with glaze.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Cosima asks Delphine on a date.

I

Delphine’s unanticipated response to having students is relief. Her fears of being drained by so much social interaction have been largely unwarranted. Despite the hours that teaching takes away from her real work, she looks forward to her afternoons at the library and the loft, the decrease in her solitude and her emerging stability proportionate to each other instead of inverse. Her students treat her as people have always treated her, oblivious to the diminishment she thinks is lurking underneath her self-confident demeanor, and for long moments this makes her feel that her old self is rising. She hadn’t realized that being so subjugated to a part of herself would detach her from the whole of herself. She’s relieved to be finding connection again.

Her art students are both older women, one a tiny Japanese woman who came to the US, amazingly, to coach basketball, and one a sixtyish retired executive of Banana Republic. Both are cheerful and attentive and seem to enjoy her lessons. She assures them that anyone can be taught to draw if they learn a few simple techniques and they soon shed their self-doubt, sketching unselfconsciously in the bright studio. The first session begins with a lesson in seeing and she goes back to it over and over as they progress. You must see in order to draw she tells them. You must truly see. You must train yourself to identify contour, cross contour, proportion, value, angles, color, shading, and negative space. These are the qualities that comprise our visual perception. Our brains interpret these things without conscious thought. But if you are to draw, you must learn to recognize and separate these characteristics so that you can reproduce them.

She starts them on four common shapes: cylinder, sphere, cube, and cone. Look carefully, she teaches. What is the proportion of height to width? Where is the object light and where dark? What is curved and what is straight? There is no mystery, she explains. You must only learn to see.

As they practice she moves the light source, teaching them to discern how the objects’ appearances change as the light changes. Eventually they can draw the shapes confidently and realistically no matter how they are lit. Then she introduces simple arrangements and spends long stretches crouched beside them, helping them deconstruct each composition into the shapes that they can already draw, encouraging and correcting them as they process what comes so easily to her. The jar is merely a cylinder. The flowers are little cones. You know those shapes. You know how to shade them to make them seem dimensional. You can draw the jar of flowers. She tapes their drawings to the wall so that they can see a progression in their skills. She leads them into increasingly complex concepts and compositions. But always she returns to the fundamental. You must see. You must see. You must see.

II

At first they don’t understand her instruction to work without speaking, their natural inclination to
converse stifled by her gentle request for quiet, but during the third lesson she explains.

“The different sides of the brain perform different functions.” She cups her hands together and holds them to her left temple. “In general, the left side of the brain is the logical brain. This is the side that performs analysis, such as would be used for math and science. It works serially, using numbers, letters, and words.” Then she moves her hands to her right temple.

“The right side of the brain is the intuitive side. Art and music awareness, creativity, and imagination come from this side. This side thinks in images, patterns, and pictures.” She lowers her hands, but continues to gesture.

“If you want to learn to draw, you should work as much as you can from the right side. I want you to release your reliance on conscious analysis and allow yourself to work intuitively with what you are learning. Since language belongs to the left side, if we talk while you draw we are encouraging you to work from your left brain. Eventually, perhaps, you will be able to stay in the right brain and process language. But you can’t right now.” She smiles. “Comprenez vous?”

The three women establish a sweet friendship. Joanne and Aki begin to bring Delphine little gifts like cookies and home-grown vegetables. Aki gives her a small woodblock print brought from Japan the last time she visited, and Delphine hangs it in her kitchen where it won’t be overshadowed by the large paintings in the rest of the loft. After each lesson Delphine makes them tea and shows them what she is painting. She blooms in their companionship and greets each now with a happy faire la bise. They chat while they drink their tea and the women ask her questions about France and her time at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. She finds to her surprise that she doesn’t mind talking about herself with them. Perhaps, she begins to think, she’s enough of herself again to be worth knowing.

III

Sessions with Cosima are different from those with her other students. With Joanne and Aki and with the younger French students, she is calm and encouraging. She teaches them as a mother teaches, feeding them bites of information and technique as she develops their palates and leads them into independence, keeping them interested and confident. With Cosima she is no mother. They sit as equals at a bar, matching shots of intellectual bravado, each refusing to be outdone by the nimbleness of the other. Delphine has the information but Cosima has the facility to absorb and turn and amplify what she is taught. She doesn’t stay on the path; she asks unanticipated questions that force Delphine into side branches of reflection and explication for which she is not prepared. She begins to research the words from upcoming lessons, having mostly a speaker’s knowledge of her language and not a linguist’s as Cosima desires. She buys an on-line subscription to the Trésor de la Langue Française, which allows her to study word origins, evolutions, and historical context.

She finds as they move deeper into study that although she continues to set the lessons, Cosima sets the energy level, pulling from Delphine the bits of information and analysis that interest her, demanding a complete disgorging rather than a bite. She wants to discuss the nuances of the language when they review exercises or translate a text, not just the diction; she wants to know the connotation as well as the denotation of the words.

Delphine feels excited and unnerved after they meet. She doesn’t understand why Cosima wants the extra information that she will surely not require to pass her proficiency test. But since she does she works hard to provide it. And truly, she loves the little struggle of charting the correct course, of working with and against a mind that challenges her. She is amazed that no matter what she demands, Cosima is always prepared; she must work like a yeoman to comply, Delphine thinks. But
despite her enjoyment of their time together, she wonders if Cosima always learns this way or if she is using this display of intellectual prowess and stamina to court her.

There’s no doubt that Cosima is interested in her, thinks Delphine. It’s unmistakable. And she’s flattered. Cosima is beautiful and sexy smart. She’s charismatic, in fact. But Delphine doesn’t know how to respond. She doesn’t want to lead her on and she doesn’t want to reject her. She’s attracted, but when her interest starts to engage she snaps back reflexively as though Cosima has spines. It’s not calculated but it’s real nonetheless. It’s because of Isabelle, she knows; she hates Isabelle a little now, after having met Cosima, but she can’t just will away her wariness because she knows its source. Don’t do it, she thinks despite her desire to be braver. This one could hurt you.

IV

At the end of their sixth class together, when they have devolved into chatting, Cosima lingers as she usually does. She turns the conversation to education, which seems natural considering that they are together because of her schooling. She’s a born student, thinks Delphine for the thousandth time, so driven to learn. But more than that ongoing impression, Delphine is beginning to see that Cosima’s passion for literature is like her own passion for art. Cosima loves, truly loves, the depth and nuance and variety of written expression. She lives for it. She would be diminished without it. She would be willing, Delphine suspects, to sacrifice to have it, as Delphine has for her painting.

Now, as Cosima shares self-deprecating stories about high school nerdiness and undergraduate sassiness, Delphine pushes against her own knee-jerk guardedness. She’s so funny, she thinks, so open. She has respected my boundaries. What Delphine has seen in Cosima these last weeks has been the intimacy of a sinuous mind engaging hers and the deference of restrained physical attraction. She’s soothed by the separation of the intellectual from the somatic in their relationship, by the careful pace of the personal beside the gallop of the academic. She’s finding her feet again, having been given the space to gather herself, and the desire to allow Cosima to know her, to allow intimacy, is seeping in despite her prudence.

When Cosima pauses, Delphine talks about herself for the first time. She shares a little about boarding school, about quitting a pre-med track at university and transferring to art school, about the displeasure of her father. In fact, Delphine admits, despite the fact that she was admitted to one of the most prestigious art programs in France, her father withdrew his financial support and her education was paid for by her mother, who had money of her own. She is mostly estranged from her father now, she says, and her mother has since died. She misses her very much.

“I’m so sorry, Delphine,” says Cosima gently, laying her warm hand on Delphine’s forearm. It is the first time they’ve touched, except accidentally, since their handshake. Cosima squeezes lightly and then stands up, preparing to leave. After saying her goodbye she takes a step away and then turns back, skirt swinging.

“Um, there’s a grad student thing this weekend. A barbeque sort of deal. Would you like to go with me?” Delphine looks up from neatening her papers, surprised.

“Not as my date. Unless you want to. We could just go as friends. I mean, the date thing would be awesome but it’s not, like, a requirement or anything.” She shifts her bag to a more comfortable position on her shoulder and smiles. “It would totally pump my cred if you go.”

Here come her hands, she thinks affectionately, and sure enough, Cosima starts to gesture. “It’s a pig roast. The PhD candidates throw it every year for the department’s other grad students. Dr. Chatsworth -- romantic poetry -- has two acres and he always hosts because he has a big-ass pit
barbeque made out of cinderblocks. We stay up the night before to tend the pig and then everyone else comes to eat the next afternoon. Super awesome food.” She pauses.

“It’s fu-un,” she singsongs and Delphine smiles, wanting to give in. “A total retro shindig. A bonfire, guitar playing, a sing-along. Think ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ sort of classic, summer camp stuff. And … beer drinking. Corn hole. Pasty library moles in shorts. Discussion of arcane lit topics that will bore you to death.” Cosima’s eyebrows go up in a silent question and Delphine tries to beat back the little voice that tells her not to risk changing things.

“Um…” Cosima looks down, considering, and then turns her cheek to her shoulder and squeezes her eyes shut tight, making a funny face. The outside eye pops open. “Horse shoes? Cheesetastic fun. All the kids say so.”

Delphine pulls her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Oh, crap. You aren’t vegetarian, are you? Is that it? There’s other stuff to eat besides barbeque. Everybody brings something.”

Delphine shakes her head. “I eat everything,” she says smiling. “It’s a point of pride for the French.”

“Wow. That was almost full-on awkward. Saved by French … honneur … once again,” Cosima jokes.

Delphine teeters. This could be a big mistake. She doubts that if they begin a social relationship Cosima will want it to end at friendship. She could hurt Cosima or herself by crossing this line. It would be safer to keep the status quo, to discourage Cosima. Besides, Delphine isn’t sure she can give her anything more than acquaintanceship. But what if she can? Can she date Cosima without falling in love with her? Can she keep it easy when she is attracted to her, when she’s beginning to desire her? Would it be worth it? Is getting involved worth crying for months? On the other hand, is safety worth missing what might be inside this beautiful, sweet woman?

“Seriously. No pressure. I have to go but you might enjoy it. You know, see the lit major in its natural habitat.” Cosima throws her hands out in a ‘what do you think?’ gesture.

What the heck, thinks Delphine, won over. It’s just a party. Don’t be a trouillarde for once. “I would love to go.”

Cosima’s face transforms, drawing up in a slow-motion grin. The corners of her mouth reach toward her brow; her cheeks slide into happy balls, as though pulled up by a string. Her eyes squint shut, her chin dips. If she had two green curlicues on the top of her head, thinks Delphine, they would uncurl in pleasure. Her chest swells with affection and she smiles back. Fuck you, Isabelle, she thinks. Of course I would love to go.

The picture appears as Cosima starts to give her the details. Angled jaw, olive skin, mahogany hair, closed eyes. Impasto. Happiness.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Delphine and Cosima attend a pig roast and begin to fall in love.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay in posting. Stuff happens. And sometimes really, really good stuff happens.

Thanks to the wonderful MlleClaudine for her editing. Wowza! She's my nitpicking and French translation goddess.

My department (also English Literature) held a pig roast every year for its grad students and the PhD candidates took shifts all through the night to attend to the pig, just as is described here. I have such great memories of those times, where much volleyball playing and singing around a fire was done. (Also drinking, but that goes without saying. Duh.) This is my nod to all you literature nerds out there!

I promised a song to femadeofstardust, so Ira's playing "Classical Gas" is for her. If you would like to hear "Classical Gas," go here: Classical Gas (Clapton) (Or search in YouTube for "Classical Gas Eric Clapton."). This version is only guitar, so sounds like Ira (if he played as well as Eric Clapton).

Translations are provided in the end notes.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6

I

To Cosima [12:26]: I'm here.

Fm Cosima [12:26]: I'll come get you. Where r u parked?

To Cosima [12:27]: Eight cars down from the mail box.

Fm Cosima [12:27]: On my way.

The drive toward Camino Tassajara had been enjoyable, if long. Delphine seldom has reason to drive out of the city and had liked the break from traffic. Despite its age the truck was good on the open road and she hadn’t minded how loud it was with the window open and the air rushing around the cab. It gave her time to think and no excuse to avoid her thoughts by listening to the radio.
It had been as cool as usual in the Bay area when she’d left and she’d worn a light jacket so she could roll the window down without freezing. But as she heads west on CA24, it’s beginning to warm up and by the time she exits the highway it’s in the 80s. She’s never been out this way before and enjoys the open, rolling topography, even though most everything is scorched brown from the summer heat. She supposes that it will transform in the fall when the rain settles in and she thinks about how she would capture that changing-over from dead to living if she were to paint it. This occupies her thoughts for some time, but even so, she doesn’t think about how the resurrection of the landscape will make a radical change of subject from months of painting a woman whose power she had hoped to kill. She doesn’t even think of Isabelle. She feels only the relief of blinking, of turning her thoughts away from futility toward possibility.

Now she stands beside the truck waiting for Cosima. She unclips her hair, slips off her jacket and tosses it onto the front seat, and bends to look in the side mirror. Her hair, once finger combed, is fine. She tries to be calm. She’s been looking forward to time outside in the sun and to getting to know Cosima better, and this party is a cautious way to do that as there will be plenty of other people around and no expectation of intimacy. But avoidance of intimacy recognizes that intimacy is a possibility and this leaves her a little jangled. She wants so desperately to be happy again and this road could cut back, taking her in the wrong direction.

She walks around the truck to the passenger side and takes out a canvas bag, confirming before she sets it down that nothing has tipped over or broken. She wonders briefly if she is properly dressed; she’d considered wearing a sun dress as she would have for any other afternoon occasion, but Cosima had said that the event was casual and that they’d likely be sitting on the ground, so she had settled on shorts. Now she stands beside the truck tugging at her crisp black tailored shorts to make sure they lie properly after the long drive. She had also chosen a white tank and black bra, and she runs her hand along her waistband to check that everything is neatly tucked. There is nothing else to do but hang fire.

II

Delphine sees Cosima step out from the end of the long driveway and look both directions before locating her. She’s never seen Cosima dressed so casually before. She’s headed toward Delphine in khaki cargo shorts and a Berkeley tee, which blows Delphine’s mind a little. She’s so used to the knit dresses and tights and patterns and make-up; this Cosima has on tennis shoes and isn’t entirely clean. She’s clearly been working around a fire.

“Hey, Delphine,” she calls when she gets close. She is smiling, as always, and Delphine feels the little rise as Cosima’s happy energy flows over her. She comes around the side of the truck and gives Delphine a buss on the cheek, smelling slightly of smoke. “You made it.”

Delphine feels lighter suddenly. She hadn’t realized she’d be so happy to see her. “Yes, I enjoyed the drive, actually. And it’s so much warmer out here.”

“It’s nice, right? Unfortunately, it’s also buggier,” says Cosima. “I hope you aren’t one of those people who swells up from mosquito bites, because there’s, like, a Dothraki army of the little suckers in the backyard.”

“No, no swelling. Just the usual itchy bumps.”

“That’s good, because swatting and hurling Shakespearean insults at them hasn’t dissuaded them so far. The Renaissance guys are pissed; now everyone knows their bard mojo is crap.” They laugh.
“Wow. Bitchin’ ride,” says Cosima, putting her hands on the warm blue door of the truck’s cab and leaning to look through the window. She turns her head to the side and says over her shoulder, “What year is it?”

“1960 Dodge.”

“That’s the year my dad was born, so this thing should have silver sideburns. Will you take me for a ride sometime?”

“Maybe,” says Delphine smiling. “When you learn to conjugate the past perfect progressive tense, including the common exceptions.”

“Tuesday then,” Cosima says with a grin. She turns around and leans back against the truck. “So … thanks for coming all the way out here. It’s pretty far just to eat barbeque.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’ve been looking forward to it. I’ve never been to a pig roast before.”

“Well, who has? It’s not that common of a deal.”

There’s a little moment of silence until Cosima pulls away from the truck and points down the street.

“See that crapboat grey Toyota down on the left?” she says. “That’s mine. His name is Steve. I’d like to say I drive him to hype my cool struggling-grad-student image, but it’s really just a frugality thing; my parents want me to wring every possible mile out of him before they have him put down.”

“Poor Steve,” smiles Delphine.

“Yeah, dead Japanese import walking, for sure. Still, I’ll miss him when he goes. He and I have smoked a lot of weed together, canoodled a lot of girls together…” She shrugs, smiling, and then gestures toward the canvas bag at Delphine’s feet. “Is this everything?”

“Yes. I brought wine and some food to share.”

“That’s cool. You know you didn’t have to though, right?”

“I know. But it is impolite to visit someone’s home empty-handed.”

“Well, just don’t be surprised if the boys snatch this bag from you before we even get to the house. I don’t think they get enough to eat.” She puts her hands up, palms out. “ Seriously.”

Delphine laughs again.

“You ready to hit wonk-town?”

“Let me just lock up,” says Delphine, reaching into her pocket for her keys. “My guitar is inside.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Good to see you’ve embraced your inner camp counselor. Are you gonna play at the campfire later?”

“Maybe,” says Delphine again. “But you’ll have to ask me politely in French to see it.”

“I’m show, not tell, remember? No spreken ze French. I’ll have to write it out.”

“Is that a problem?” asks Delphine, raising her brows.

“Of course not,” says Cosima. “I live to pass you notes.”
Delphine picks up her bag and they walk toward the driveway.

“You look very nice, by the way,” says Cosima. “Great legs.”

“Thanks,” says Delphine, feeling pleased and a little bit flustered.

III

Sure enough, as they as the round the corner at the end of the long driveway, maybe fifty yards from the street, two young men wave and start toward them. Delphine and Cosima continue the few last feet to the stone walk beside the house and stop to wait for them; slightly below them and well away from the house is the pit where a whole pig is cooking, split lengthwise and pressed flat, its deep brown skin glistening in the afternoon sun. There are about thirty people scattered around the huge yard, which is a tidy but parched collection of grass, weeds, and patches of dirt. It’s been recently mowed but it’s not really a lawn, not like the green areas around the house. It’s just an open space that appears to be left mostly untended. Delphine suspects that in the fall and winter it’s greener, more like the swaths of grass that are shaded by the trees along its edges, but in its summer condition it reminds her pleasantly of her drive along the highway, where the hills had been as curved and brown as chicken eggs and just as full of sleeping life. The yard is like that; its possibilities feel welcoming.

Looking down at the clumps of students laughing and drinking below her, Delphine is struck by the sharp shadows flung about by the sunlight, each brightly-dressed person casually casting a dark doppelganger which, as it moves about, stays at heel like a dog. If she unfocuses her eyes, the shadows look like overlapping dots, negative space that elongates and contracts and shifts like smoke, pinned to the ground by gesticulating pillars of color that float across pools of brown and yellow and dusty green. Her thoughts flash to her palette, dotted with paint that will shift and elongate under her brush when she paints this, the colors her own faithful dog in her journey across the canvas. Cosima pulls her back by saying, “Here come the boys. They’re liable to be super awkward at first, just so you know.”

Both men are wearing shorts and tees like Cosima. One is slender, with pronounced cheekbones, and the other is softer, with glasses and a shock of soft brown hair that falls across his forehead. The slender one’s t-shirt has on it a picture of an open book with ‘451F’ rising in flames above it and the other’s says ‘Dost thou even hoist?’ above a picture of a beer bottle.

“Delphine, this is Scott and Ira.” She points at Scott and says, “Medieval and Renaissance” and at Ira and says “Critical theory and 20th century American.”

“Boys, this is Delphine. French and art. Mind your manners.” Despite her choice of words, Delphine can tell from Cosima’s tone and expression that she’s fond of the men, who are clearly happy to see her and, she suspects, to check out who she’s brought to the picnic.

“Hey, Delphine,” Scott offers with a little wave, his greeting overlapping Ira’s “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hello,” she waves back.

“Scott and Ira and I took Victorian Cultural Studies together back in the day and we’ve been friends ever since,” explains Cosima.

“We play Agricola together sometimes,” Scott says. “Do you know that game? No? Well, it’s a
Euro-style board game dealing with resource management. You start with a farmer couple and then play fourteen rounds, in which you…. He peters out when he sees Cosima’s dude, what are you doing? face. He clears his throat and says, “Cosima always wins.”

“Duh,” says Cosima, laughing. “They fight but they always go down in the end.

“They do have their charms, however. Scotty makes pretty good chili,” she continues. “Killer hot.” Scott flushes and breaks into a shy, goofy grin.

“It’s coffee,” he confesses. “I put in coffee.”

“And Ira makes totally elite pot roast. We always eat before we play. The games last forever, so food’s a thing.”

“And what does Cosima cook?” Delphine asks them.

“Oh, she cooks Mexican mostly: tacos, enchiladas, menudo. Her guac is killer,” says Scott.

“It’s sooo good,” confirms Ira. “Cosima tells us that you are an artist,” he continues politely.

“Yes, I’m a painter,” she replies. “And occasionally I tutor French and teach drawing. Cosima is my pupil right now, as you probably know.”

She turns to include Cosima in the conversation and finds that Cosima is looking intently at her. Their eyes catch and hold for a second until Delphine begins to feel embarrassed and disengages, turning back to the men.

“Have you been helping roast the pig, like Cosima?”

Scott looks down at his dirty shirt and says, “Oh, sorry. Yeah. Ira and I had the two-to-four shift and Cosima and Alison had four-to-six, so we all just stayed up and drank beer and played ‘Whose Line is it Anyway: Lit Version.’ Ira won.”

Delphine looks at Cosima with raised eyebrows and Cosima says, “Hey. I was baked. I can so beat all these guys.”

“It’s true,” chirps Ira. “She always wins that too. She can quote everything. Everything.” Cosima smirks.

After a long moment in which the guys grin happily and can’t think of anything else to say, Cosima says to Delphine, “Come on. Let’s put your stuff in the house. Then we can come out and walk around.”

Scott reaches toward Delphine’s bag and says, “Can I help you with that?”

“No, thank you,” says Delphine. “I think I’ve got it.”

He puts his arm down. The guys stand, unmoving.

“See ya on the flip side,” Cosima tells them, shooing them away with her hands. Then she motions for Delphine to follow her to the deck at the back of the house. When they’ve gone a few feet Scott pipes up with “Give me now leave, to leave thee,” and then, apparently realizing how flustered and ridiculous he sounds, says under his breath, “shit.” Cosima’s look says to Delphine I told you so.
The house is comfortable and lived-in looking, neat but not fancy, and is filled with the sort of furniture that hints that it is not a primary residence. Her impression is of belongings handed down over time from another home, things not decrepit but slightly out of style, slightly worn. The rooms she can see are filled with students. A half-dozen crowd the kitchen and another handful are standing in the den by the sliding doors. A middle-aged man is at the counter with a glass of wine, laughing and eating potato chips. Cosima leads Delphine toward him and when he sees them he switches his wine glass to the other hand and reaches across the counter to shake hands with Delphine.

“Hi, I’m Mike Chatsworth. Welcome!”

“Delphine Cormier. Enchantée.” After the handshake she reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle of wine. “Thank you for having me,” she says. “I wasn’t sure what you might like. I hope you enjoy this.”

He takes the bottle of wine and says in excellent French, “2005 Château Barreyres, Haut-Médoc, Cru Bourgeois. Formidable! Merci beaucoup.”

She replies, “Vous êtes le bienvenu. Un bon vin est l’un des grands plaisirs dans la vie.”

“Ainsi qu’un bon livre et une belle femme. Et vous avez amené deux sur trois de ces merveilles chez moi ce soir. Ou avez-vous un livre aussi?”

“Non. Non. Pas de livre, je regrette.”

“Quel dommage.”

He smiles at Delphine and then says to Cosima, who hasn’t been able to follow the exchange very well, “You may bring beautiful French women bearing wine to my house any time. No pig roast required. Let me just put this away so the heathens don’t drink it.” And with that he bends down behind the counter and puts the bottle into what Delphine supposes is a wine cooler.

When he rises he looks around the room and says, “Cosima, have you seen Diane?” Then to Delphine, “My wife is around here somewhere. She’s probably in the garage checking on the ice cream. I’ll go find her and introduce you.”

“Dr. Chatsworth’s wife is Dr. Meyers-Chatsworth, anthropology assistant chair,” says Cosima. “They’re a big academic power couple. But she’s the bigger cheese,” she says, holding her hands a few inches apart and then moving them out as far as she can reach to emphasize the difference in their academic stature.

“Yes, it’s true. Diane is the big cheese and I’m merely cheesy. Ask any of my students. I’m just a pathetic creature with horrendous office hours.” He puts his hands to his throat and fake strangles himself. They laugh and chat a bit more, talking about Paris and academia and art. Finally he says, “Well, ladies, I’m off to locate herself. There’s wine in here and beer outside. Help yourselves. And thank you again for coming, Delphine, and for the wine.” And with that he smiles and heads off into the house.

“What a charming man,” says Delphine, who lifts her bag onto the counter and reaches in for two more bottles of wine and a blue and brown stoneware serving bowl, filled with vegetables.

“He’s a great prof. I love him. Ooh! That looks good. What is it?” asks Cosima.

“Roasted Brussels sprouts with garlic and caramelized shallot, finished with balsamic vinegar. It’s
simple to make and quite good.”

Cosima turns very slowly toward Delphine and says, “Marry me.”

Delphine barks out a laugh and replies, “Seulement si vous m’en demandez en français. And if the pig is good.”

V

Despite the mosquitoes which are as bad as promised, the afternoon is pleasant and Delphine has a good time chatting with Cosima and her friends. Most of the students are about her age and several have led rather remarkable lives, one talking about his long solo sailing expedition and another about a stint in the Peace Corps, where she dug wells in Mali. A few are conversant in French and she enjoys talking with them in her own language, which she seldom has the opportunity to speak. Some students have brought spouses and a very few have brought small children, and at one point she holds a sleeping baby so his mother can use the bathroom. Other students are playing drunk horseshoes or corn hole and she laughs when she sees that the corn hole platforms are painted with Oski the Berkeley bear, arms crossed and looking fierce, and the words Fear the Subtext.

As Cosima leads her through the party, Delphine relaxes, perhaps for the first time in months. They stand alone and talk about various things – food, cinema, family, being a teenager -- and then move on to mingle with the different clusters of people who form and disband and merge into other clusters. She is puzzled when Cosima tells her the person’s specialty each time she introduces someone, but eventually she realizes that this convention is rather like an elaborate dap, a recognition that these people are linked by common passions regardless of how their department has split into little tribes that compete with and poke fun at each other.

The students seem quite close-knit, unusually so she thinks, but they welcome her enthusiastically and she feels little of the awkwardness that often accompanies being a stranger among good friends. She sees that Cosima is a favorite, often teased or complimented (perhaps for Delphine’s sake), especially by the masters’ candidates for whom she has been a teaching assistant. They tell Delphine funny stories about Cosima’s tutoring sessions and her grading style (which is famously and surprisingly strict). She is clearly respected for her knowledge and for her engaging, challenging teaching style, and Delphine begins to feel proud of her, in addition to the other emotions that are beginning to unfold.

As the afternoon progresses and she meets more and more of the department, Delphine senses that beneath the silly comments about “Cosima’s new girlfriend” and “a blessed end to Cosima’s spinster’s life” lies an undercurrent of real affection, as though the other students are truly pulling for Cosima to win her. She is flattered and she wonders what Cosima has told them that they would feel this about her, about them both.

VI

Eventually it’s time to eat and Cosima leaves her to help carry out the side dishes. Delphine goes to the table where the pig has been laid out and, wearing blue latex gloves, helps Scott and Ira pull apart the meat. It’s hot and they stop frequently to shake their hands, pulling off hunks of the tender meat and dropping them onto the tabletop to cool before being able to pick them up again. Scott and Ira relax after a few minutes and Delphine can see why Cosima likes them so much. They are sweet men who keep her laughing as they work. She is amazed that so many jokes about pigs and
barbeque exist and is surprisingly happy that they seem to know every one of them, particularly since Ira’s stiff, polite delivery makes everything twice as funny.

When Cosima has finished making trips back and forth from the house, the pork is ready and lies in glistening shreds in large aluminum pans. Adjacent are loaves of white bread, enormous platters of cole slaw, squirt bottles containing different barbeque sauces, and mounds of pickle chips, all of which are traditional barbeque accompaniments according to Ira, who seems to think she’s just off the boat from France and needs an explanation. Two more picnic tables are covered in salads of various sorts, beans, vegetables, desserts, and all of the other things the students have brought. On the ground sit iced tin tubs filled with soda, water, and beer. Cosima tells Delphine that the homemade ice creams, compliments of the Drs. Chatsworth, will be brought out after dark.

As they move down the tables, Cosima makes recommendations about what Delphine should try, cautioning against Rachel’s pickled beet salad (trust me) and touting Alison’s spicy deviled eggs topped with salmon (they’re killer). When they have loaded their plates they move to the side of the yard that is becoming shaded as the sun changes position and sit down cross-legged on the grass. Scott and Ira, along with Alison and Sarah, whom she had met earlier, join them. Scott has three deviled eggs and refuses to share with Sarah, who has already eaten hers. Alison beams with pride and turns to see if Delphine has tasted hers yet. Delphine pops her egg into her mouth while everyone waits for her reaction and admits, with closed eyes and a solemn nod, that it is delicious. All the food is delicious, actually, and Delphine grins at Cosima when she takes her first bite of the pork, which is smoky, tender, and moist. Delphine cleans her plate and joins in the rowdy dialogue that pings back and forth between the friends. She feels like she’s been inducted into a private club.

VII

When everyone has eaten and they’ve helped return the leftover food to the kitchen and bundled up the first load of trash, Delphine and Cosima sit and talk. The Renaissance and Medieval guys have challenged the 20th Century guys to a game of corn hole and their trash talk drifts over to where the women talk drowsily, lying flat on the grass with their knees up. The edge of the heat has dulled and the sun is marching toward the horizon, casting long shadows that will eventually pool into a single black mat. Delphine finds herself drifting, eyes heavy, and after a little struggle with herself goes out, the last thing she hears being Sarah’s “Beckett is not a fucking modernist, Scott!”

When Delphine awakens, Cosima is sitting with her leg pressed against Delphine’s side, reading a worn collection of Anna Akhmatova and leaning forward at an awkward angle to shade Delphine’s eyes from the last of the sun. She smiles as Delphine blinks sleepily and sits up.

“Feel better?” she asks.

Delphine nods, scrubbing lightly at her face.

“Come on,” says Cosima. “Let’s go sit by the fire. There’ll be fewer mosquitos.”

While she napped, someone had built a fire on the other side of the yard in a pit surrounded by ashy stones. Several people are seated there talking, some slouched on camping chairs, a few on short logs, a few on the ground. Ira has a guitar and is playing little pieces of things, amusing himself. Delphine and Cosima plop down near Sarah and watch the fire, still small and working its way up the sticks and logs that are stacked above it. Sarah and Cosima begin talking about a hand clapping game they played as children and about the origins of the little songs that are traditional to both it and jumping rope. Sarah asks if Delphine played such games when she was little and when she says no,
she and Cosima launch into a complicated demonstration while singing “Miss Mary Mack.” Delphine is charmed and spends a while learning to play, laughing as they sit cross-legged opposite each other and try to clap faster than any of them can manage.

VIII

Suddenly, it is evening. Suddenly the gathering feels intimate, as the rest of the yard recedes into the dark and everyone gathers around the fire. More than thirty people have stayed and some must sit between the legs of the others, conversation becoming quieter in deference to that intimacy. The Drs. Chatsworth have joined them and sit with the casual grace of those long accustomed to orienting themselves to each other. They drink wine and smile as Ira continues to doodle little pieces of songs and the crickets court in the woods. Eventually someone asks him to play for them and he accedes. He’s skilled, “Classical Gas” rising without error beside the sparks from the fire. After a while Cosima leans over to Delphine and says, “Would you like to go get your guitar? They’ll start singing before long. Do you want to play?”

They rise and ask Sarah to save their seats and they begin the walk up to the truck. At the top of the rise Delphine turns to look at the yard, so different now from when she had admired it earlier in the day. It has transformed to deep blues, to figures half in shadow, to a composition heavy with color on one side and soft with darkness on the other. Cosima is quiet while Delphine creates and releases the picture and when they turn to continue their walk, she asks what Delphine sees when she stops just to look.

“I don’t know how to explain exactly,” says Delphine. “I want to remember the way things fit together, I guess.” She looks down at her feet, desiring to share this private thing with Cosima, whom she feels will understand it. “I want to remember how each thing looks to me in that instant: a whole, created composition, formed without my other senses. Every moment is a separate, unique picture and I want to see it, just for itself, before it becomes something else. It’s become a habit, I suppose, after years of painting.”

Delphine looks at Cosima’s face, sincere and calm in the moonlight. She is rare, wonderful, she thinks, and smiles to say that she does understand how it feels to have that special insight, to love something so much.

“Delphine?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever kiss girls?” Cosima asks quietly.

Delphine nods, barely moving.

“Would you like to kiss me?” Cosima whispers.

Delphine lowers her gaze to Cosima’s lips and then looks back up, into her eyes. She pauses. This
feels like stepping into air, like inhaling water; it could all go very wrong. This is the fork where her choice could circle back to the agony of the last months or could take her forward to something good. She has only a few seconds to decide. She wavers. Accept or decline? Be brave or be safe? She chooses Cosima.

She nods.

Cosima leans forward and in a slow, smooth motion closes the distance between them. Her kiss is slightly open-mouthed and gentle. Delphine tilts her face down and parts her lips to receive it. They don’t move, don’t touch anywhere but at the lips. They stand in the crickety darkness and without the distraction of movement, of pulling at each other, of divided tactility, without the taste of an unfamiliar mouth, Delphine experiences the moment through only her sensitized lips: tenderness, desire, patience, softness. After a few seconds Cosima pulls back, but before she departs Delphine’s space she kisses Delphine again, on the cheek, beside her mouth. A sweet kiss.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a while.”

And so they begin with a walk across a yard. Delphine forgets that she has been unhappy. She forgets that she had expected only to enjoy a bit of friendship and an afternoon in the sun. She feels alone in her body; there is no pressure behind her tongue, no ghost straddling her. She inhales deeply, smelling smoke and dirt and skin, and gradually – finally – lets go, uncurling her hand to let Isabelle drop away. She turns away from herself and toward Cosima, who gathers Delphine to her as gently and firmly as if she were a cygnet.

Isabelle floats away; she recedes until she is a tiny dot on the surface of the water. Then Cosima holds out her hand, leading Delphine through the darkness to the calm bank at the edge of the river.

Chapter End Notes

"Formidable! Merci beaucoup!" : Wonderful! Thank you very much!

"Vous êtes le bienvenu. Un bon vin est l’un des grands plaisirs dans la vie." : You are very welcome. A good wine is one of the great pleasures of life.

"Ainsi qu’un bon livre et une belle femme. Et vous avez amené deux sur trois de ces merveilles chez moi ce soir. Ou avez-vous un livre aussi?" : As are a good book and a beautiful woman. And now you have brought two of the three into my home. Or have you brought a book as well?

"Non. Non. Pas de livre, je regrette.” : No, no. No book I am sorry to say.

"Quel dommage.” : That's too bad.

"Seulement si vous m'en demandez en français." : Only if you ask me in French.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Proportion is so important.

Chapter Notes

This chapter skips ahead a few weeks.

Thanks to MlleClaudine and Alex for editing assistance.

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I

She is lying on her belly, arms up and crossed under her pillow, and she can see only part of the room. The lamplight from the living room is diffused by shoji screens at the head of the bed, screens made from old doors whose central panels have been removed and replaced with paper. Everything she sees is greyed down in this twilight, objects and patches of cast light distilled into planes of muted color, geometrics of charcoal and smoky blue and ashy corn silk that cling to each other in long, abstract embraces. These shapes she raises and lowers and turns lazily in her imagination, shifting perspectives until she can see a drunken Escherian tableau of ambiguous ups and downs. It takes a few moments for this image to form and then she places it in a dark gallery in which it is lit by a single light, its colors emboldened by illumination that contradicts the very reason she has created it.

Cosima is straddling her legs, hands laid lightly on her buttocks, not moving. She can feel the brush of wet hair on her thighs, the gentle pressure of still hands. She appreciates this passivity as she recovers, having curled inward in orgasm and then reemerged through her eyes, reestablishing the equilibrium that orients her properly in her world. She cannot function long without this tether to her sight, preferring sex in which she can see both her partner’s body and her own, especially now that Isabelle has made her mistrustful of unrestricted vulnerability. Seeing has always heightened her arousal, guiding what she feels and stimulating the most provocative and complex responses. But now it also allows her an escape, a release valve if she begins to feel too much or if she becomes disoriented by anything’s ability to touch her secret self. Cosima is such a thing, she thinks, a lover who wants to know her and love her, and in her attraction she must be careful not to let go of herself. Enjoy the touching she thinks, love Cosima, but hold something back so that you don’t fly apart when she leaves you. This is the only way to be safe.

Cosima moves her hands to the small of Delphine’s back, lightly placing her thumbs on either side of her spine. Delphine feels the subtle ignition of pleasure as her nerve endings spark and leap down a deep, unstoppable fuse toward her feet. She can’t help herself. She closes her eyes.
They sit at the kitchen table in a pool of light, the tabletop and dishes bright, the air alive with motes. The rest of the loft has retreated into darkness and dozes in its silent bed. Having pushed aside the remains of their midnight meal, Delphine leans forward with a stack of index cards and tests Cosima’s vocabulary. The cards flash white as she lays them one by one on the table and Cosima’s dark head, bent in concentration, glistens each time she moves, pale scalp and immaculate, twisted hair a distraction as Delphine quizzes and corrects.

Cosima’s exam is in twelve days, so they have intensified their studying. Cosima works at the loft now, though Delphine still meets her other students in the beige classroom at the library. She sits on the sofa most days, studying silently while Delphine works with Joanne and Aki, paints, or otherwise attends to the business of living. Delphine has begun to give her long passages to translate and sets a timer that Cosima can’t see, forcing her to quickly navigate something unfamiliar and to tamp down her desire to be absolutely precise with each word. Delphine insists on it. Look for the big picture first. You can always go back and examine the details, she counsels.

Ever since they became lovers Delphine has been uncomfortable letting Cosima pay her for lessons. Now that they are working together several hours a day, her discomfort has worsened. Although she needs the money, it feels dishonorable to take payment for something that she gives as a gift; she hates the awkward moment of exchange, or worse yet, finding the folded bills tucked under a book or a tube of paint. Cosima will never be able to pay a fair price for her time now, so why live in the awkward shadowland where Cosima sacrifices to pay her and still feels as though it isn’t enough? Cosima has her own sense of honor, just as she has, and Delphine debates how to respect this without making either of them feel unprincipled.

This push-pull of will has been a concern, each stubborn on the other’s behalf and unwilling to concede. Finally they decide that instead of money, Cosima will trade for Delphine’s time, posing one hour for each hour of studying. Now as they sit at the table and Cosima runs through the cards once more on her own, Delphine leans back to examine her as a subject, as a body to be interpreted instead of caressed. She is slender and well-proportioned, which isn’t really what Delphine likes to paint. Regardless of how thrilling Cosima’s beauty is in every other context, Delphine struggles with how to approach her as part of a composition. She considers which style would suit her, which positions. Which of all the things she feels about this woman does she want to paint? Does she wish to explicate her emotions at all?

When Cosima finishes reviewing and looks up, Delphine struggles to refocus. The picture she was imagining bursts but she is briefly caught in a place where there is nothing, no image and no recognition of what she is looking at. After a moment she snaps back in and flushes, Cosima’s expression immediately morphing her embarrassment and adrenaline into arousal. She feels like a perfectly ripe fig that begs to be pulled apart. She scoots her chair sideways and unbuttons the two buttons holding together the paint-spattered man’s shirt she had thrown on when they got out of bed. Cosima pulls off her tee before rising and Delphine watches as her shoulders and the tops of her breasts brighten, so saturated with light that for the tiniest moment they become void of color. As Cosima stands and approaches, Delphine thinks chiaroscuro: Cosima’s beautiful body illuminated against the darkness of the loft. She thinks of Caravaggio, of sensual, creamy women painted against black backgrounds, their skin glowing with light. She knows now where Cosima fits, how to light her, how to paint her.

Saliva releases under her tongue; her skin ignites; her sex opens, preparing for a kiss.

Delphine spreads her shirt as Cosima straddles her lap and one last vision of light and dark bursts
through her brain before her sight leaves her entirely and she cannot think of anything at all.

III

Cosima is standing at the bathroom sink, face damp from having just been washed, when Delphine steps into the room to wrap her arms around her waist.

“Good morning,” she murmurs.

“Good morning, beautiful,” says Cosima, pressing her head back onto Delphine’s shoulder and closing her eyes. When she opens them she finds Delphine gazing at her in the mirror.

“What?” she asks.

Delphine places her left hand on Cosima’s shoulder and reaches around with her other hand to touch her cheek. She presses her head against Cosima’s in a little hug and then looks over her shoulder at their reflection, framed in the bathroom mirror. They stand silently. She moves her hand and watches herself caress Cosima’s face, tracing her features with gentle fingertips: eyebrows, eyelids, forehead, chin, jaw. When she is finished she returns her hand to Cosima’s cheek and looks into the mirror for a long time.

“When I first met you, I thought your mouth was your best feature,” she finally says. “I was right. Your lips are gorgeous. Pale, full, more beautifully textured than any I have ever seen. I can’t keep my eyes off them.”

Cosima smiles and Delphine places her fingertips on the fullest part of her bottom lip. “I want to touch them, kiss them, all the time.”

Cosima presses a kiss to Delphine’s palm, attempting to turn in her arms, but Delphine holds her still by the shoulder. She nudges Cosima’s face forward so that they are again looking into the mirror, her hand still cupping Cosima’s cheek.

“Did you know that faces have a particular, mostly-universal proportion? When it’s incorrect we recognize it instantly, such as when we see the face of a person with Down syndrome. Even if the proportions are only slightly off, we might not know what is wrong but we still sense it. We’re hardwired to process this.

“When I look at your face, I react to its symmetries and proportions as I would to any other face. It’s beautiful and it looks exactly as it should. But I also feel something more, something that I don’t feel when I look at other faces.” She pauses.

“Do you remember when you told me that you tasted words as a child? That you experienced language through two senses?”

“Yeah,” says Cosima, nodding a little.

“Well, even though I experience this feeling that I am describing, this reaction to you, through only one sense -- my sight -- what I see is still a duality. I see two different things at the same time. Or maybe I feel two things. I don’t know how to explain it.” She sighs.

Cosima squeezes the hand at her shoulder.

Delphine places her index finger at the side of Cosima’s mouth, pointing up. “The edges of your
mouth align with your pupils. Do you see?"

Cosima nods. Delphine makes a C shape with her thumb and index finger, placing the finger as close as she can reach to the crown of Cosima’s head and the thumb at the corner of her eye. Then she moves her hand down, keeping her fingers the same distance apart, and measures from eye to chin.

“Eyes are halfway down the face. People who are learning to draw usually place the eyes too high and their drawings look wrong, no matter how beautifully detailed they may be.”

She closes her fingers to the width of Cosima’s eye and then places them on either side of her nose.

“The space between the eyes is one eye wide,” she says, and then keeping her fingers the same distance apart, measures Cosima’s face from side to side, being careful not to touch her eyes.

“The face is five eyes across.”

She cups Cosima’s cheek again. Her eyes are soft as their eyes connect in the mirror.

“When I look at your face, I don’t see only what you look like. I also specifically notice the symmetry, the proportions, the balance of your features. I measure them. I don’t mean to do it, but it’s the way I look at everything, like there’s is an invisible grid that helps me place things in perspective. Because of this, when I look at you my reaction is partly aesthetic and partly … emotional. One drives the other.

“It’s not a conscious thing. But in my mind’s eye, in the place from which I paint, I feel it. A sense of … rightness, of … recognition … that I haven’t experienced before, even though I have seen many beautiful faces. It moves me … and it scares me to feel connected to you because of this thing I can’t explain.

“I don’t know what will happen with us, Cosima.” Her eyes begin to fill.

“I just know that your face is exactly five eyes across.”

She squeezes Cosima’s shoulder and puts her hands down, starting to turn away.

Cosima turns and pulls Delphine back to her, holding her tightly, stilling her.

“Don’t be afraid,” she whispers. “You don’t need to be afraid.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

What happened before they made love.

Chapter Notes

This chapter fills in the details (a bit) about what happened before Cosima and Delphine became lovers. Although its place in the story is after Chapter 7, its place in the timeline is before those events. The next chapter will resume a normal narrative timeline.

Thanks to MlleClaudine for her keen eye (and wit). My writing is the better for it. Thanks to JanGoo, my Parisian friend, for help with the French.

And all you people who keep asking about my tumblr account? You've worn me down. I have finally given up and am creating one. Geez! I will post the link with the next chapter. :)

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

The Monday after the pig roast Cosima had arrived at the loft in the early afternoon. Shouldering an overstuffed backpack and carrying a cloth grocery bag, she’d stepped through Delphine’s ochre door smelling like warm fabric and jute, perhaps from the knotted, beaded cuff on her right wrist or maybe just from the rope handles of her bag. She’d worn her usual, a snug dress, but her small, brown feet were in flat leather sandals instead of heels. To Delphine she looked like a fertility goddess, hips and breasts prominent, dreads pulled up and back, her neck draped with chains and bangles that could have been offerings. Delphine had embraced her, pulling her into a hug that she could not really return for having full arms.

She had taken Cosima’s bag to the kitchen and when she returned had found her in the studio, backpack dropped onto the floor beside her, examining the large industrial shelving unit where Delphine’s still-life props were stored. From her posture Delphine could see that she was concentrating, moving her gaze slowly from object to object. Against the shelves, where the items were grouped in small arrangements by color, Cosima’s mien suggested a sort of poised curiosity, as though she were a bride examining her dowry, the most beautiful objects saved just for her.

Delphine had watched for a while and then moved to Cosima’s side, looking at the collection as she supposed Cosima saw it, natural materials tucked in with metals and ceramics and glass, a strange, unexpected jumble of things that had once caught Delphine’s eye and now expressed something about her that was unnamable. For a moment she felt exposed, wondering what Cosima could read, like tea leaves, in their shapes and combinations.
“Do you like it?” she had asked after standing quietly at her shoulder.

“Yeah, very much,” replied Cosima. “Where did you find all this stuff? It must have taken years to collect it all.”

“Many years, actually,” she had admitted. “I’m always picking things up off the ground or out of trash bins. The best objects are the surprises, things I find when I’m looking for something else, like this little Chinese pamphlet I saw in an Asian market where I was buying kimchi. I’ve painted it a number of times.”

“I like this clock,” said Cosima, pointing to an old metal alarm clock, whose dented once-red body and white face were now orange with rust. “It looks like a faithful soldier to me.”

Delphine had been silent, pondering this, and had placed the clock immediately into a tableau of draped tabletop, mahogany box, and tailor’s shears.

“What do you treasure any of these things? Or is it just that they’re good to paint?”

She had looked from the shelf to Cosima, wondering why she had asked this and how – and if – she could answer. She was attached to many of the objects in her loft, of course. She moved them frequently, grouping them in different combinations to excite her eyes and imagination. Her home life was almost completely organized around beautiful and interesting visual cues. But was she attached to them beyond the obvious pleasure she took in looking at them? Were they replaceable?

“Mostly I’m interested in what I can paint,” she had finally answered. “But sometimes … I feel an affinity for the object itself.

“That branch on the bottom shelf I would miss if it disappeared. I’m not sure why. It’s beautiful, but many branches are beautiful. I just like it and I’ve had it a long time. I hung it on my wall for a while and I’ve painted it. It’s just a branch, but I would know if it were replaced by another one, one that I didn’t care about.

“And this yellow pitcher,” she had continued, pointing. “I found it in a charity store. Its color is unremarkable and it’s machine made. It’s ugly, really. Still, it has a damaged look that appeals to me; it’s nicely cracked, don’t you think? And, I don’t know …” She saw that Cosima was waiting for her to finish and that she cared about what Delphine was trying to say.

“It has … an intrinsic dignity … that should be respected despite its nothing appearance.” She had looked down, a bit embarrassed. “It’s just a piece of junk. But I feel that someone should love it.”

Delphine had watched her type with two thumbs onto the glowing screen cupped in her hands. In this little act she felt Cosima’s desire to reach to her, to understand her world in a way that others usually skirted and to touch it with her own world.

“I found it. I’m da bomb!” Cosima had said laughing, looking up to see if Delphine wanted to hear it. *Of course I do*, thought Delphine.

“The narrator, who is both male and female,” Cosima explained, “is diving down to a shipwreck.
He/she says:

‘… I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth….’

“So, like, what you said about the pitcher, about how it has a dignity that should be respected, seems like saying that the thing itself is more valuable that the myth surrounding it.” Her hands were animated and Delphine had wanted to enter her explanation, to shift her viewpoint fully into the verbal.

“It’s most like itself when we can see what’s under the glaze, right? It’s like the glaze, the perfection of mass production, is its myth. But the object beneath the glaze, the parts that show through because of the chips and cracks? That is the thing itself and I think that’s what you love. Is that it?”

Yes, it is true, thought Delphine. She hadn’t before considered that she might love the pitcher for any reason other than its appearance. Perhaps her respect for it was, in fact, provoked by something more. Perhaps she could see what its self was and she recognized that self. Perhaps she loved it because she knew it was a ruined thing that still wanted to be filled.

She smiled at Cosima and nodded. That was it, exactly.

II

Cosima had brought homemade salsa and guacamole. While she stood frying tortilla wedges into chips, Delphine had talked about Paris, how different it was from San Francisco and how, in many ways, she preferred the city by the bay. Regardless of the fact that Paris is one of the world’s great cultural centers, she’d explained, she felt that her adopted home fit her better. It was a place where she could set her own expectations. As they talked, she’d admitted that she felt obligated to many things -- family duties, academic rigor, and rules -- and that she had always cleaved to those responsibilities, chastising herself when she defied or ignored them. One of her boarding school friends had called her Guilt Princess, she’d laughed, because the consensus was that Delphine had been born guilty, feeling remorseful even though she never got caught doing anything wrong.

Cosima set down a bowl of hot, salty tortilla chips and a couple bottles of La Lupulosa, which she poured into the beer glasses she had also brought. “This is famous for its head, so I like to use a glass,” she explained. “I don’t bother when I drink the normal stuff.”

“Salud!” she’d said as they clinked glasses.

Delphine dipped into Cosima’s salsa, which was unconventional and delicious, bits of banana pepper making it slightly tart.

“This is wonderful,” she sighed. “It would be great on an omelet.”

“I know, right?” said Cosima. “It’s my mom’s recipe. So’s the guac. But I’ve never mentioned that
“Little fact to the boys. They think it’s all me.” She laughed.

For a few minutes they drank and ate, the salt and spice and malty beer a bridge into small talk and then reminiscence. Finally, Delphine had leaned back with a happy sigh and returned to the subject of San Francisco. When she’d chosen painting over medicine, she said, her father had been furious. And she might have given it up in obedience had her mother not counseled her to do what she knew was right for herself. But, despite this rebellion, she’d admitted, it wasn’t until she’d moved to San Francisco that she had truly felt like an adult. Pursuing painting had been supported by her mother, but defying her father unaided hadn’t come until she had chosen to stay in California, when she was well into her twenties. He had tried several times to change her mind; just recently he’d offered her one last chance to return to Paris and had then cut her off from her inheritance when she’d declined. That was one of the reasons she was now teaching, she’d admitted. She had no safety net.

“These have been a hard few months for you,” said Cosima.

“Yes,” she’d replied, and then added with a smile, “but things are looking better.”

Cosima had given her an enormous grin then and had risen to kiss her nicely on the mouth before pulling two more beers from the fridge. When she returned to the table she brought Delphine one of the bottle caps, which was black with a white owl. Delphine had turned it over in her hand several times, appreciating the quality of the logo and the simple beauty of the functional, fluted edge.

After she poured the next glasses, Cosima had remarked on the irony of their respective situations. She was, she said, perceived by some people to be a rule breaker, what with the pot smoking and her casual attitude toward time management, among other things. But her inclination to do what she wanted was rooted in her parents’ trust in her. How can you truly rebel when the people closest to you don’t criticize any behavior that’s not life-threatening? she’d asked. Delphine, on the other hand, had made hard choices that had changed her life. She was the real rebel.

“Well,” said Delphine with a little laugh, “Other than the one big revolt, I’m still pretty much a slave to my upbringing, at least in most things, so I’m not a real, real rebel.”

“More softcore, then,” Cosima had teased. “No money-shot mutinies for you.”


“But what about sleeping with women?” Cosima had asked more seriously. “Don’t you consider that to be a big, hardcore breaking of the rules, at least for your family? I mean, was that desire difficult to accept about yourself? Didn’t you feel guilty about it?”

“I slept only with men when I was in France because that was the expectation,” Delphine admitted. “But I like men, so it wasn’t a horrible thing.”

She’d looked down at the table and begun to move chip crumbs around with her fingertip. “But there was a girl in boarding school. She was Portuguese, a beautiful girl with dark eyes. She was my first love, actually. My roommate withdrew from school early, so I was alone in my room for several months and ma douce portugaise would come late at night and slip into bed with me.

“I loved her, as much as I could love at 16; she was smart and gentle. I’d never been naked with someone before … so you can imagine. We learned about sex together.

“But I did feel guilty. Who knows what my father would have done had he found out. I didn’t want to disappoint him. And relationships between girls at school was forbidden. We were always afraid of being discovered and expelled. I just … I couldn’t … I just wanted her.”
“What happened to her?” Cosima had asked.

Delphine had become surprisingly emotional about those memories. She hadn’t thought of Joana in years.

“She graduated and returned to Portugal. She married. I don’t know what happened after that,” was all she said.

III

That evening they had gone to bed for the first time. Cosima had undressed for Delphine, sitting on the edge of the mattress to take off her shoes and jewelry before standing to pull her dress over her head. Delphine had been on the other side of the bed removing her watch and the clip that held up her hair. When she looked up, Cosima had been bent at the waist, pulling down her panties, the olive skin of her back alive in the lamplight. When she straightened, her breasts had rounded again and her belly had unpleated into a flat, muscular plane. Delphine was glad for the moment Cosima stood still and let her look.

Cosima’s neat, slender body was sensual in a different way from Isabelle’s. Her sexual energy was neither voluptuous nor insistent, but calmer and more potential, as though something inside were waiting to be released. Cosima stepped slightly away from the bed so that more of her body was visible and Delphine felt the urge to wrap around her, to twist the wire that ran through her and then let it go. This impulse was offertory, concomitant, a desire to both possess her life force and to stand back and admire it. It had welled up in response to her previous fleeting impression of a fertility idol and to her attraction to Cosima’s now-revealed sweetness, and she’d leapt to it, emboldened.

She’d stepped forward, pulling at her clothes, and had placed her lips at Cosima’s throat, where the pulse was strong and rapid. She’d pressed the flat of her tongue there, suddenly aware of her own heartbeat, high and tight in her chest. Closing her eyes to heighten the feeling of Cosima throbbing at the door of her mouth, she’d heard their breathy gasps, her own hot breath bursting through the tiny space where their skin didn’t touch. They’d kissed and Cosima’s hair had brushed her forearm as she’d pressed them together belly to lips. When she’d opened her eyes for a moment to look, her impression was of ocean, sky, a dark field planted with little seeds.

IV

Cosima had risen to get a drink of water and had come back with a handful of mandarins. She lay down and propped on her elbow, had peeled the fruit, placing the strips of oily, orange skin on Delphine’s belly. They ate the fruit piece by piece, pausing between bites to kiss or for Cosima to nip at Delphine’s hipbones and ribs. Delphine had watched the fruit rise and fall with her breathing, watched as again and again the crown of Cosima’s head had replaced her face as she bent to kiss Delphine’s skin. Later, the subtle weight of the fruit on her belly; the taste of it on Cosima’s tongue as they kissed; the rows of Cosima’s hair, twisted and turned over like furrows, would rise as her sense memories of their first night. But in the moment there had been nothing but her desire and her need to see Cosima’s eyes as she’d pushed her over and plunged, like a coulter, deep into the moist, fecund center of her. There was no thought of pausing, no thought of removing the remains of their impromptu repast, and as they’d made love they’d crushed the fragrant peels into the bedclothes. The next morning, even after Delphine had brushed them away to pull up the sheets, the room had smelled like citrus and like Cosima’s fingers, oily, sweet, and grasping at love.
The poem quoted is Adrienne Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck." Here is the whole thing. No copyright infringement is intended.

First having read the book of myths, and loaded the camera, and checked the edge of the knife-blade, I put on the body-armor of black rubber the absurd flippers the grave and awkward mask.

I am having to do this not like Cousteau with his assiduous team aboard the sun-flooded schooner but here alone.

There is a ladder. The ladder is always there hanging innocently close to the side of the schooner. We know what it is for, we who have used it. Otherwise it is a piece of maritime floss some sundry equipment.

I go down. Rung after rung and still the oxygen immerses me the blue light the clear atoms of our human air.

I go down. My flippers cripple me, I crawl like an insect down the ladder and there is no one to tell me when the ocean will begin.

First the air is blue and then it is bluer and then green and then black I am blacking out and yet my mask is powerful it pumps my blood with power the sea is another story the sea is not a question of power I have to learn alone to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative hauntings.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the ones who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

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Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The inside of Delphine's head is an interesting and sometimes disquieted place.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, for all of the encouragement and kind words you send each time I post. I'm thankful for all of you and very happy that less than a year ago I decided to enter the fanfic/Cophine world. I had no idea how much you would come to mean to me or how my life would be changed by knowing you.

Even though Orphan Black is now over, I'm not yet ready to give up these characters or their fans and I hope that you all stick around for a while because I will miss your company if you do not.

Thanks to MlleClaudine and Alex for reading, correcting, and cheerleading, and to JanGoo and FrenchClone, who assist with the French as needed. Also, I'd like to thank femadeofstardust for her wise words and most cherished friendship; she has helped me hash out so many ideas, timelines, and plot points that we'd be in a much different story now without her. It takes a village and these women are MY village.

Oh, I almost forgot. I have created a tumblr. It doesn't have content yet (but will soon); however, you can contact me there if you like. It's: UnalteredSonnetCXVI. I look forward to hearing from you.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

Delphine wakes alone to brilliant, early-morning sunlight. Cosima is at her own apartment, wanting to spare Delphine her pre-exam nerves. Delphine understands Cosima’s need to be alone; the language proficiency test is important to her and to fail it would set her back months. But she is a bit surprised that Cosima is now flustered, having been so assured throughout the process and so diligent in preparing. Delphine has never before seen Cosima disquieted; even in bed, at her most vulnerable, she projects confidence, accepting and offering with equal grace. She is a bit like Isabelle in this imperturbability, but is far sweeter, more subtle. Her self-assurance is grounding rather than domineering.

Delphine strips the bed and after starting laundry, pours a cup of coffee and sits at her drafting table to consider a project that she’s been mulling for several days. There is a design contest for the stained glass windows of a new Episcopal cathedral in Phoenix. Its prize is $7500.00 and the right to supervise the installation. She’s never worked in glass but she is attracted to the challenge of it and the idea of creating something large, complex, and permanent. She doesn’t have to physically create
the windows so it is really just a design project like any other, but she ponders how to change the painterly process of modifying a composition in the moment, of seeing it at each stage and reworking it as often as is necessary, into a process in which the idea is set at the beginning and then becomes unchangeable. Creation of the plan for the window will be the end of her interaction with it instead of the beginning, and this unsettles her. Extended intercourse is such a part of her method.

She closes her eyes and sits for a while with her head in her hands, tightening her mind and picturing the space where the windows will be installed. The cathedral is of a traditional Spanish mission design, but altered to make it less dependent on Roman Catholic tropes. As such, it mimics adobe and has traditional dark wood pews, pulpits, and choir stalls, but no side or apsidal chapels. The structure is meant to look old and it feels to Delphine very high church, even more so than its counterpart across the city, which she has also researched. Her task is to design the windows for the nave -- eight arched panels which will be quite prominent without the side chapels to obscure them -- and a 28-foot-tall window to fill the ogee arch behind the altar. It is an enormous endeavor and she has only three months to submit her proposal.

She raises her head and gazes out her windows, focusing on the light and not what it illuminates. Light is such a central and changeable component of window design; it’s not something that she normally has to consider. Her paintings are lit artificially, illuminated in whatever way she chooses and requiring no accommodation for changes in the natural light. The interior light, the light from the paint itself, comes from her and is immutable. But she cannot control the lighting of the windows; they will be seen both during the day and during the night, when there is full sun and when there is rain. Color that is brilliant in the cloudless Arizona sunshine will be muted and dark at night or when it’s overcast. Is this acceptable? Is it changeable? Will she be designing only for a sliver of the window’s existence?

She considers all the styles of glass design that she could choose, going back to the ones she’s already discarded, just to make sure that she is finished with them. Traditional depictions of the holy family, prophets, and church symbols seem the most obvious choice considering that the cathedral, despite its modern touches, recalls the 18th century missions of the area. But she wants to do something unusual, something beautiful, not just a literal rendering of famous biblical dogma or the abstract swirls of color that are currently popular in liturgical design. It is not enough, for her, to design what has the best chance of being selected. She wants to design something meaningful and bold, something that will be identified with this particular sanctuary.

She rises, walks to the studio windows, and looks sideways toward the street. The Metcalf Shoes sign greets her like an elderly friend, powdered and dressed neatly for the day. The windows on the surrounding buildings are gold with the angled morning sun, reflective in a way that lasts only a few minutes and then changes into dusty commonness. She retreats into her mind’s eye and tries to identify what the windows remind her of. The even spacing, the parallel lines, the bright light pouring off of them…. They look like rows of topaz or gold-foiled chocolates or maybe even chains of office. Suddenly she imagines the sun as a bulb and the evenly-spaced windows as the perforations on a roll of cinema film, light pouring through them as the film is threaded and then disappearing as they are gripped by the mechanical teeth that tow them into the machine. Why is she thinking of this now? What has it to do with the cathedral?

She walks back to her drafting table and sits quietly, waiting to make the connection. She thinks about vanishing light, refocused light, mutable color, illuminated stories, foundation versus decoration. Can she elongate the daily life of the windows, keeping them viable even as their surroundings pull them into the dark? Can she emphasize the importance of the essential, of the perforations, and not just the colored embellishment of the story? Can she reveal the truth beneath the real? She thinks that she must; the story is not enough. She must depict the thing itself and not the myth. But what is the thing?
She finds Cosima’s note by the door, underneath her key bowl, as she is preparing to leave the loft. Moments before she had texted Cosima to say that she would be waiting for her outside the test site to take her for a drink. She knows Cosima won’t look at her phone until the test is over and she thinks finding an invitation to celebrate the breaching of this hurdle will make a nice surprise.

The note is written on heavy cream-colored stock inside a matching envelope. Her name is written on the outside in what looks like real ink from a fountain pen; it’s a deep forest green. Before she opens it she examines the texture of the paper and the beautiful ink. She knows that it has been chosen carefully to please her and she smiles.

Delphine –

I know I have told you many times how much I appreciate your help these past weeks. However, I find the need to tell you again, more formally, despite the fact that there is little formality in our relationship. So … thank you. Thank you for everything. Not just for teaching me but for all the other things as well. This whole process has taken on a different meaning because you shared it with me. It’s no longer just about learning unknown words to get to the words I want, though that was important. It has also become about learning a personal language, a shared language, and the fact that more and more I want that language to be primary.

This poem is for you. I wrote it because I want to speak to you from my world in the same way you have shared your world with me. It’s composed from the things on MY shelf, the things that I have collected and that I love.

Cosima

p.s. I’m no poet, but the feelings are real. So … yeah. (Insert sheepish but charming grin here.)

Delphine turns to the last sheet of paper.

Grammar

I like the way declension sounds.

It sounds like …

taking you inside

and bearing down.

It sounds like

fingers in a fist.

It sounds like

syllables strung with spit.

I want to conjugate

this irregular passion,

change my form to plural,

no longer je but nous.

I want to diagram the way your hands speak,
me the subordinate clause of you.

I read your meaning in translation,  
the subtext deep but bleeding through.

I like the way declension sounds.  
And the green-brown eyes of a girl like you.

Delphine stands still for a moment and then slips the note back into the envelope and onto the table. She picks up her keys and when she walks out the door, grasps them so they don’t jingle; they press into her palm as she walks down the stairs. The light outside is sharp and she needs her sunglasses.

III

There is a bench across the courtyard from the west wing of LeConte Hall and Delphine sits there to wait. The building is in the Beaux-Arts style, which she recognizes because it is the style of architecture taught at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, from which she holds a second cycle degree. The hall is large, stately, and eclectic in the way of Beaux-Arts buildings, and she is pleased that of all the buildings on campus, this is the one in which Cosima is taking her exam; sitting outside a modern building of nondescript style would be so much less distracting.

LeConte has large golden oak doors whose color is vibrant against the pale grey of its walls. The steps leading to the doors are inset with red brick, so that there is a sweep of color from the doorways to the courtyard. The top two of three tall banks of windows are divided by engaged columns, and Sather Tower, with its sixty-one-bell carillon, is just visible over its roof. Beyond that, though, the thing that most interests Delphine is that LeConte sits on an incline and is much shorter at the top of the street that at the bottom. It is an interesting study in perspective.

Delphine works with perspective all of the time; it’s fundamental to painting because it allows for the appearance of depth on a flat surface. With LeConte, the fact that the building begins as a wedge rather than a rectangle surprises the eye; it makes the perspective seems forced or incorrect until the brain analyzes the irregularity and makes accommodations. She imagines painting the building in a sort of softened realism, emphasizing the building’s interesting lines and the bold color of the doors against the lovely greys of stone and courtyard, embracing the strange way the eye wants the building to be what is expected and not what it is. Her position from the bench does not allow for much experimentation with atmospheric perspective, as her angle to the facade and her proximity to the building don’t require much depiction of distance. Still, she thinks, the colors of the tower and sky must be greyed down a bit to depict how the natural particles in the air subdue them more than they do to the colors of the objects in the foreground.

She comforts herself with this familiar train of thought and stays there for as long as she can, contemplating the shadows and bright spots, the angles and colors, and the relationships and proximities of what is before her. But as time passes and she is no longer able to distract herself with painting, her thoughts turn to Cosima. She has been trying to avoid this moment for some time but the note has discomposed her. She wasn’t expecting such a forthright declaration of intent nor such an eloquent, tangible look into Cosima’s feelings. She understands, of course, that the turn in their relationship has been into the romantic; they are lovers, after all. And she has feelings for Cosima. Of course she does. She thinks she is falling in love. But to have Cosima tell her so explicitly that she wants their relationship to be primary, essential, and revelatory is a big step, and for Delphine, who has largely ignored her fears thus far, it is disquieting. She has been proceeding with as little self-examination as possible, living almost completely in the moment of each feeling and experience. Now she must address the truth beneath the good sex, the intimacy, and the wonderful, buoyant
friendship. The note has awakened her and she is panicked by the knowledge that if she embraces Cosima’s feelings she could get badly hurt. They could both get hurt. She has been reminded that things are very real.

She begins to arrange her thoughts into two lines that begin with her and extend toward Isabelle and Cosima in a widening vee. Will she be able to fall in love again, really fall in love, and to commit to it as completely as she should, or has she been broken by her relationship with Isabelle? Is it possible that she’s the vanishing point and that Isabelle and Cosima will converge at her, she the terminus of their emotions? She’s felt passion in Cosima’s bed, real passion, and their friendship is precious to her. But what if at the center she is now hollow, her heart a seed surrounded by emptiness, like an apricot’s? How can she know until Cosima cuts deep into her if she is capable of surrendering? Of sustaining. Of feeling as she once did.

Or worse, she thinks, what if she is capable of complete, unselfish, and committed love and Cosima leaves her? Once she is cut and her deep self is exposed, how can she survive a second loss? How can she allow herself to mix with Cosima and to become so close that Cosima enters and changes her? How can she risk this, knowing that once it happens, they can’t be unblended?

Maybe she’s not in love with Cosima at all, she rationalizes. What if she has been fooling herself about Cosima, lured by the nurturing she needs after the suffering of the last months? Maybe what she feels isn’t the beginning of love at all, but desperate clutching at a life raft. How can that be good? And even if her feelings are true, if she is truly in love, is the emotion rising in her something that she can handle? Would it be fair to Cosima to continue if she can’t manage it? She values Cosima and is protective enough not to lure her into a place where she, herself, cannot breathe.

She checks her watch. Cosima’s exam ended twenty minutes ago. Perhaps she didn’t see Delphine’s text. Or she could be tied up with some other departmental requirement or a conversation from which she can’t escape. Maybe, Delphine thinks, she should leave. This would be a good time to make the break and save them both the heartache. The tutoring is over now; there is no reason for them to be together except to pursue their love affair. For once, she thinks, she should step away from what she wants and accept that Cosima deserves better than a cracked and chipped woman who may not be able to hold what is poured into her. Cosima will be hurt, she knows, but not as hurt as she will be if Delphine fails her later. No matter the pain Cosima feels now, she thinks, she will eventually be better off for Delphine’s withdrawal. Cosima won’t believe it, but as with all lost things, Delphine will eventually recede into the distance. She will change from the façade into the tower and then into the sky. She will become grey. And then she’ll be too far away to see.

She sets her bag on her lap. She will wait another five minutes and if Cosima doesn’t come, she’ll leave. She’s too weak to just get up and get on with it; she needs a moment to make it happen. In a last effort to find another way, she wonders if perhaps they can become buddies, can still see each other without touching. But she knows this is merely avoidance of the inevitable. Cosima wouldn’t accept it even if Delphine could abide it, so it’s best to make the break clean, to crawl into her bed to grieve and get on with the process. Perhaps she can survive it if she begins now.

She checks her watch. Six minutes have passed. She rises from the bench and begins the walk toward the street where she has parked, pulling out her phone to text Cosima and apologize. She tries not to cry. As she unlocks the screen she hears her name and turns to see Cosima trotting toward her, grin enormous, dreads bouncing as she hurries to stop her.

“It’s over!” she exclaims, throwing her arms out in a gesture of relief and joy.

Delphine doesn’t think. She launches herself into Cosima’s arms, burying her face in her neck. She cannot see Cosima’s surprise nor the moment she closes her eyes. She only feels Cosima’s arms
wrapping around her, tightening when Delphine extends the embrace, desperate to hold onto her.

IV

Good wine in beautiful, thin wine glasses and lovely small plates that Delphine has had the pleasure of ordering in French; she is pleased. She has chosen a small bistro on a quiet side street and she and Cosima are sitting out front at a café table, drinking and talking. It’s chilly, as is typical of late afternoons in the area, and both women are wearing light jackets. But it is lovely outside nonetheless; the sky is bright blue and the air so clean and crisp it smacks of apples. She watches contentedly as Cosima takes bites of cheese, pâté, and glazed figs, obviously enjoying what Delphine has chosen.

Cosima is confident that she passed the language proficiency exam; the article provided for translation concerned Pierre L'Enfant’s death, in poverty, in 1825, and she tells Delphine that she had plenty of time to work through it twice. There were only a few places where she had to rely on context to compensate for a hole in her vocabulary, and she comments that Delphine’s having had her practice this had been very helpful. “And guess what?” she exclaims. “Savonnette was on there! Almost all L’Enfant owned at his death were three pocket watches. I never thought that word would be useful, so I owe you a drink.”

Delphine has put her concerns about their relationship into a place she can ignore and for now is concentrating on the wine and Cosima’s happy conversation, which has turned to a description of a cat she dragged home as a child, a cat that had apparently been “saved” while sunbathing on the rail of a fence in his own yard. Cosima admits, laughingly, that she had liberated a number of neighborhood animals and other items of interest when she was small.

“I was quite the ninja klepto, and my parents became friendly with lots of the neighbors, who figured out to call our house first if something went missing. Dogs, garden gnomes, landscaping rocks. One time I brought home a newspaper off someone’s porch. My parents couldn’t figure out why I did it. Anyway, eventually I dragged home a ratty orange tomcat and they let me keep him when they couldn’t find his owner. His name was Kevin.” She pops a piece of Roquefort into her mouth and chases it with wine.

“Kevin was great, but in his later years he became a terrible farter. I sorta changed his name to Ass Biscuit,” she grins. “Did you ever have a cat?”

“Yes,” says Delphine, “but she wasn’t gassy. Which is good because she liked to sleep draped around my neck.”

“Yeah. That’s a really good thing. Because cat farts are like, the worst. They are like … dog farts that have been left in a plastic bag in the sun for three days.”

“Arghhhh, Cosima,” Delphine laughs, “stop!”

Cosima raises her arms in a “Score!” gesture and exclaims, “Still the queen!”

Delphine calls the waiter and orders a bowl of mussels and some more bread. She and Cosima talk about their parents and Delphine describes living for a year in Kenya, which was the last time she traveled with her family before being sent to boarding school. The masks on her shelf are from that time and are among the only things she brought from France. She has yet to paint them, she says.

“Were you happy there?” asks Cosima.

“Oh, yes,” replies Delphine. “It was the happiest time of my childhood.”

“Perhaps we can go there together someday,” says Cosima.
Delphine reaches across the table to squeeze Cosima’s hand. Just as she is sitting back she sees something over Cosima’s shoulder that sends her heart into her throat. She becomes very still. Cosima looks at her, clearly confused by the change in atmosphere.

“What is it?” she says, starting to turn around.

There, coming down the street toward their table, is Isabelle.

Chapter End Notes

LeConte Hall is the physics building at Berkeley. I chose it randomly from a map, not knowing what department was housed in it; once I did some research, I found out that its architecture fit perfectly into the story and my headcannon for Delphine. (If you could see my working notes from months ago you would find her university and the degree that she holds listed there, just as I have described in this chapter.) It was just dumb luck that I chose that building, so sometimes the universe sends you a gift.

Also, for those of you who wonder why the test would be administered in the physics building, remember that the test applies to all disciplines and could be administered anywhere that had a free classroom/lecture hall large enough to accommodate it. I know this from my own experience with this sort of thing.

Finally, I would like to create a cover for this story but I'm not sure how to go about it. Any suggestions on the mechanics would be wonderful.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Two steps forward, one step back.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to MlleClaudine for reading and correcting and to femadeofstardust for making a suggestion that saved me from complete embarrassment.

Thanks to all the readers who take the time to comment. I don't think I'd write or post without the encouragement.

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I

“Oh, shit,” says Cosima, “is that her?”

Delphine is caught completely off guard, her reaction to seeing Isabelle instantaneous and uncontrollable. She wants to shove back from the table and disappear but she’s immobilized, blood having rushed into her head to press against the backs of her eyes and forehead, killing thought. Without knowing it she begins to breathe through her mouth, and her heart, which has leapt high in her chest, slams and darts like a trapped bird. She has most of a city block to calm herself and by the time Isabelle is within hailing distance she’s recovered enough to release the chair arms and latch onto Cosima with her eyes, turning back to Isabelle only as she reaches the table.

She hasn’t seen Isabelle since the afternoon she had arrived unexpectedly at the loft to end their relationship, telling Delphine that she was uncomfortable with the exclusivity and emotional attachment that they had drifted into. “I care about you, Delphine,” Isabelle had said, “but I am not in love with you. And I don’t want what this … this … thing … is becoming. I don’t want a love affair, OK? I just want to fuck and have fun. I told you that when we first hooked up. I never lied to you.” Delphine had put her hand in her hair and had stepped away and then back, her thoughts spinning in disbelief, her body unsure how to arrange itself. They’d made love … no, they’d had sex … the night before and Isabelle had said nothing about being unhappy. “I’m sorry,” continued Isabelle, “but all of this emotion, all of this sincerity, it’s too much. I need to split.”

After Isabelle had left, Delphine couldn’t accept that the end of their relationship had been so sudden and final. She had texted several times in the next few days, wanting to talk, offering to resume with the understanding that no commitment would develop, but Isabelle was unmoved and Delphine had finally given up. Months later, after turning herself inside-out, she had put Isabelle into a mostly buried place, alternately too hurt to touch the memories and too angry to let them go.

Now she is staring as Isabelle approaches, her ex-lover’s pale skin and copper hair as beautiful as ever. Everything Delphine feels tilts sideways, slippery and unknowable. Her stammering brain
grasps at the familiar and composes a portrait of oranges, golds, and blues, embers against ice. It vanishes as her first impulse to run returns, followed by a second, weaker impulse to be uncivil. She does neither.

Isabelle stops at the table and, just as outgoing and self-possessed as ever, turns to Cosima to introduce herself. Delphine cannot help but compare this Isabelle to the one she knew. She has cut her hair; it’s slightly shorter and more styled. Her eyes are still striking, an icy pale blue unlike any Delphine has seen before or since and her skin is creamy and pink at the cheeks. But those eyes, alive in that beautiful face, don’t target Delphine now. They merely look at her; they don’t look into her.

Isabelle seems unchanged, already joking with Cosima in that clever way, Delphine thinks bitterly, that is intended to charm and impress. Delphine places Isabelle’s demeanor and appearance into the category labeled unaffected, which affronts her because Delphine hardly recognizes herself. She’s been struggling to find her center again, to know her heart, and here is the woman who scooped it out of her like an avocado pit, untouched by the experience. When she turns to Delphine and begins to chat as though Delphine were a casual acquaintance, Delphine looks again for some sign that Isabelle regrets having let her go, some indication that she is sorry for having devastated her. There is nothing.

They talk about the gallery and Delphine’s need to pick up her paintings, and eventually Isabelle says goodbye and goes back up the street, turning to enter a clothing store. Delphine is silent and stony-faced.

“What’s going on? Are you OK?” asks Cosima. “You seem kinda freaked out.”

“It’s nothing,” replies Delphine. “I was just surprised to see her.” And then, “Are you ready to go?”

Not waiting for Cosima to answer, she calls the waiter and asks for their bill. She’s so unnerved that she can’t figure out the tip and ends up throwing down an extra twenty just so that they can leave. Cosima sits quietly and says nothing.

Their mussels are untouched when they walk away.

II

They argue when Delphine drops Cosima back at Berkeley to pick up her car. Or so it seems to Delphine. Cosima wants to spend the night with her, either at the loft or at her place. She says that she wants to talk about Isabelle, to console Delphine or to at least understand what happened at the café. But Delphine wants to be alone and wants it as soon as possible. They sit in the truck, pulled up behind Cosima’s car, but Cosima won’t get out. As much as she wants to be open and to alleviate Cosima’s growing concern, Delphine finds that she can’t soften her tone or get her muscles to form an expression that isn’t clenched and wooden. She feels panicked, afraid that she will say or do something unkind. But she can’t stop herself. Everything is pressing in and she needs to get away from it.

Cosima tries again and again to calm her. She offers to sit with her, to listen, to talk, or to stay in another room without interacting, just as a comfort. She says that she is worried, having never seen Delphine so upset. What the heck happened between you and Isabelle? she asks. Finally she gets out of the truck and turns back, pausing before she closes the door. Delphine says, as best she can, that she is sorry and Cosima offers to come to the loft the next day. Perhaps they can talk and she can pose; she wants to start repaying her debt.
Delphine is stung by this offer. It suggests that Cosima still thinks there is a debt and that there is some point at which it will be paid and the final quantifiable thing between them will be completed. She feels herself nod, aware that she has precipitated this conversation, that this tension is entirely her fault, and worst of all, that she has revealed her weakness. But she feels powerless at the moment to change what is happening. She puts the truck in gear and pulls out, even though she doesn’t want Cosima to see her disappear. Once she’s out of the parking lot she starts to shake, and it doesn’t stop until she’s in the shower trying to scrub off the day.

III

Delphine feels better the next day, having pushed her anxiety back into the hole where it normally cowers. She texts Cosima to apologize and suggests the loft as a place to study for her qualifying exam. *I’ll make lunch*, she offers, *and then you can work this afternoon while I set up to paint.*

Cosima arrives just before noon and Delphine hugs her and apologizes yet again. She kisses her hair and inhales the scent that reminds her of laughing and making love, then steps back to say that for lunch she’s made butternut squash soup and open-faced grilled cheese sandwiches with *fleur de sel*. The meal is soothing, both delicious and simple, and they talk of ordinary things. They wash the few dishes and then Delphine helps Cosima carry up a stack of books from her car. While Cosima piles some beside the sofa, which is her customary study space, and spreads others on the coffee table and sofa cushions, Delphine moves to her studio to organize her materials and consider a pose.

Delphine hasn’t painted in a hyper-realistic style since university and never with the tenebristic opulence of Caravaggio. She thinks she will modify that method and paint in a more Impressionistic way, preserving the gorgeous light but softening slightly the perfection of the figure. This is risky because so much of the impact of the chiaroscuro will come from the play of light on the subject’s skin and the absolute clarity of the image. She is looking forward to the challenge. But beneath her excitement, she feels anxious about painting Cosima. Painting is her most personal and self-defining experience, and she hasn’t worked with a model since Isabelle. To juxtapose the two lovers in her safe place is perilous, which yesterday’s events have revealed in a most disturbing way.

Despite her reservations, she is happy that Cosima has come to the loft and she tries to put aside her uneasiness. She doesn’t want to lose Cosima because she can’t get out from under Isabelle. She hopes that while she paints she will disappear into her creativity and Cosima will devolve into a model, a body instead of a lover. Her painter persona is the place where she can be both concave and convex, a reciprocation that should help her sort her feelings, and objectifying Cosima may allow her to replace her anxiety with something less destructive, something that Cosima may think is just part of her method. Delphine tries to ignore her unease as she prepares her work space, but an undercurrent lurks, and she wonders how the sensitive Cosima will react if her excitement about posing is replaced by dismay about Delphine’s attitude.

IV

That evening, after an afternoon of reviewing notes, Cosima is ready to model. For almost an hour Delphine arranges her in various poses: on a chair, on the sofa, and on the floor. She lies down; stands up; faces out, in, and down. Delphine requests attitudes reflecting curiosity, unease, sensuality, concentration. As they experiment Delphine touches Cosima gently to position her limbs and face correctly, and each time Cosima gives her a little smile. Sometimes Cosima makes jokes or they talk about art, but mostly they work companionably, in silence.
Finally Delphine decides to paint Cosima on the navy sofa. The sofa is in the Queen Anne style, with curved arms and a camelback and Delphine thinks it appropriate to the sumptuous *still-life with human being* composition that is forming in her mind. She and Cosima carry the sofa to the platform that holds her still life table and place the sofa on it, the table behind. They spend a few minutes moving both pieces in increments of a degree or two until Delphine had exactly the angle she wants. Then she drapes pieces of cloth on the sofa to work out a color scheme. She asks Cosima to bring some of her books over, and combined with a number of her own books and others from the still-life shelf, arranges them on the floor. The table she drapes loosely with a piece of cream-colored cloth, and places books on it as well.

With the bones of the composition established, Delphine asks Cosima to come with her to the shelves. "Choose the things you like," she instructs and watches as Cosima considers. She chooses the African masks, a tall pyramid of clear glass, a rough wooden box with red Chinese characters on the top, and an articulated wood drawing mannequin.

"Pick one more thing," says Delphine. "It looks better if you work with odd numbers." Cosima pauses and then chooses the cracked yellow pitcher.

When they return to the staging area, Delphine arranges the objects on the still life table, walking to her easel occasionally to check angles and heights, and when she is finally satisfied she asks Cosima to undress and lie on the sofa. "Is that OK?" she asks. "You can leave your panties on if you want."

Cosima undresses completely and allows Delphine to pose her, walk to the easel, repose her, and so on. Finally she is arranged just as Delphine wants: on her back, glasses off and back arm covering her eyes. Her back leg is bent and her front leg extends over the sofa’s edge, the ball of her foot resting lightly on the floor. Delphine covers her with a dark red velvet drape which she manipulates into gorgeous deep folds that cover her groin and belly. Finally she kneels and carefully arranges Cosima’s front arm so that her hand rests, palm up, on a stack of books. She places her glasses gently between her fingers, where they swing slightly until settling into equilibrium.

She is suddenly filled with great tenderness for Cosima, for her patience and willingness to let Delphine fuss until she is satisfied, for her beautiful body. Before she rises, she leans in and kisses her lightly on the lips.

That night she dreams of wings. They hang above her, motionless and terrible. They have no locus but erupt from each other in an enormous upsweep of power, the shafts of the feathers sharp, the vanes luminous. In their imbrication they look like pleated paper skirts or tympanic fans or horrible, bladed tongues; their brutish potential, their sexual energy, is palpable.

She stares, agape, and then the moment stretches, compressing her chest. She senses a gathering of intent, knows that the wings will beat down and strike her. Her brain hitches in panic. What will happen when the wings descend? Will they caress or obliterate?

She recognizes the shifting of muscle beneath the pivot, watches as the bony crests tip back and up. She wants to close her eyes, to draw her face down to protect her throat, but she cannot move and so resigns, frozen and terrified, waiting for the blow. Darkness drops, complete and instantaneous, and with it come the ghastly wings. As they rush toward her she stops breathing and lets go.

She jerks awake, trembling and afraid. Aroused.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Cosima passes a test and Delphine fails one.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to those who made this chapter better. This week MlleClaudine and femadeofstardust take honors.

Thanks to all those who read and comment. I appreciate your company and support.

If you would like to learn more about some of the works that Cosima discusses in her proficiency examination, see the endnotes. I have provided links to three things you may find interesting. Also, although Cosima's examination is similar to the one I took at university, oral exams at my school were not administered until the dissertation defense, so my comprehensive exam was written.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I

Posing, draping, lighting, sketching. Photographing to facilitate re-draping. Blocking-in color. Step by step Delphine honors the process. Cosima is a good model; aided by the fact that she is lying down, she is able to stay still for 30 or 40 minutes at a time. She seems to disappear into her head while she poses. Delphine expected her to want to chat but she is mostly quiet and Delphine wonders where she goes. Is she thinking about her dissertation? Is she letting her mind wander? Is she mimicking Delphine’s attitude, shoving down thoughts that would upset her and make her fidget?

Delphine’s plan to veil her painting persona, her deep self that bleeds onto the easel, has mostly worked. She is physically present, of course, amiable even, but she’s as cautious as a snail when working with Cosima, pulling in when she feels herself become too fond, too tempted to put down her brush and seduce Cosima on the sofa. She lets Cosima see her body and touch her at any time, but she can’t bare her emotions while in her painting clothes. Because of this the skeleton of Cosima’s painting is born intellectually, with technique but not passion.

Normally when she paints a model there is no relationship to be considered; she can open herself completely with no fear of being approached. But her relationship with Cosima is intimate and impassioned and it must be managed. Cosima has feelings for her; she’s said it several times. And she also knows that Cosima wants to be closer, is leaning towards something miscible, inseparable. She is entering the place that Delphine went with Isabelle: in love and wanting more than just sex. So Delphine objectifies, giving herself time to consider and perhaps withdraw, treating Cosima when she paints as only a model and not a lover.

She is ambivalent about this success in denying her lover the door to her sanctum. She feels safer withdrawing occasionally, but she also feels that she is missing something or perhaps risking
something that she doesn’t want to lose. How can she love painting and love Cosima and not allow the two to elide? To paint without love feels false. To let Cosima too far into her marrow feels dangerous. She doesn’t know a way to keep this part of herself for herself without dishonoring Cosima’s devotion, or if it’s even right to will herself to a place of no fear or withholding. After all, as Isabelle has recently reminded her, love brings pain. There’s no escaping that.

II

The morning of Cosima’s qualifying exam Delphine gets up early and takes particular care in dressing. Cosima has invited her to sit in on the examination; it’s oral and will be held in a terraced classroom so may be observed without distracting either Cosima or the examiners. Cosima is positive she’ll pass and has confided to Delphine that her advisor has already indicated that unless she wets her pants or otherwise makes a fool of herself while defending her dissertation topic, it will be approved. The boys are throwing a party afterwards, so confident is everyone that Cosima will not only pass but destroy the exam.

When Delphine arrives at the examination venue, she sees Scott, Alison, and Ira sitting outside.

“Hey, Delphine,” says Scott. “We were just waiting for you.”

“Hi,” says Delphine, hugging each of them in turn. “Cosima didn’t mention that you’d be here. It’s so good to see you.”

“Are you coming to the party? I made pot roast,” says Ira.

“Of course,” Delphine smiles. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

They enter the building, still 20 minutes early, and stand in the back of the lecture hall. Cosima is chatting with a woman who Delphine assumes is one of the examining professors. When Cosima sees them she excuses herself and trots up the stairs, teasing her friends and kissing Delphine.

“Thanks for coming, Scoobies!”

They talk for a few minutes, Alison throwing out quotations and suggestions of things to remember during the exam, until one of the professors calls Cosima down to begin the test. Delphine and the others sit in a clump at the top of the room, Scott sitting next to Delphine so that he can whisper explanations as the test progresses. Looking down the raked desks to the teaching platform, Delphine thinks of teeth, and creates a picture of a pink tongue entering an opened mouth. She pushes this out of her head immediately, embarrassed to have formed an erotic composition at this inappropriate time.

The exam begins with a 45 minute section on Old and Middle English literature. Cosima is required to discuss Caedmon’s Hymn and the Exeter Manuscript, the relationship between Latin literacy and the rise of the Anglo-Saxon language, and Beowulf, from which she must quote from memory at least five lines of Old English and then translate them. She quotes twelve. Then there are questions about Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Canterbury Tales, from which she is also required to quote; and questions about the social context of and symbolism found in Parlement of Foules and other Middle English works. At one point there is extended intercourse as Cosima defends her unorthodox interpretation of Thomas More’s Utopia. Then the first section of the exam is over.

During a ten minute break during which the examiners confer and Cosima sits and drinks a bottle of water, Delphine listens as Scott, Ira, and Alison whisper about how they think she is doing. Alison
fears that Cosima’s *Utopia* argument may have been a mistake, while Scott says that the examiners will be impressed by her determination to defend her position and her ability to quote so many examples from the text. They all agree that she is doing well and that she clearly knows her stuff, and they marvel, for the thousandth time, about her ability to remember so many quotations from so many periods of literature. Delphine, who is completely out of her element, feels something beginning to well up inside. Watching Cosima paint with words, impassioned and confident, is thrilling, and Delphine feels an enriched affinity for her. She recognizes that their passions are kindred.

The second part of the test begins and when the topic is announced, the three PhD candidates silently high five each other with their eyes. Scott leans to Delphine and says under his breath, “She knows this cold. Sit back and observe the master.”

Cosima does indeed know 20th Century British Literature and speaks with confidence and insight about everything the examiners ask, particularly about the rise of Modernism and the WWI poets, whom she clearly has a soft spot for. Delphine again feels love and pride and a sort of awe rise, and she wants somehow to paint Cosima’s words, her knowledge, and her articulate explanations. She wants to know more about these things that Cosima loves so that she can be part of this world of words. She feels, strangely, that she could be more open in Cosima’s world than her own although she isn’t sure why.

Cosima’s defense of her dissertation topic, the third part of the oral exam, is excellent, and the examiners confer for only a moment or two before telling Cosima that she has passed with highest honors and may begin her dissertation. Delphine and the others cheer from the back of the room and this time high five each other for real while Cosima shakes the hands of the examiners and runs up the stairs. Scott lifts her in a great twirling hug and they all laugh and hoot to congratulate her on her fantastic performance. Delphine hugs her last and their embrace lingers as the others observe; when they break apart the group heads for Scott’s apartment, as happy and exuberant as freshmen.

III

Delphine is sitting at her drafting table sketching when Cosima arrives with Thai take-out. Cosima kisses her on the back of the neck, looks over her shoulder, and says, “Oh, cool. You’ve started the design. Want to eat or wait till later? Are you in the zone?”

“Let’s eat now,” says Delphine. “I’m starving. I want to talk to you about this anyway.”

They sit at the kitchen table in the chairs that have become “their chairs” and tuck into *Tom Gha Goong*, spicy eggplant, and green papaya salad. Delphine begins to talk about her plans for the cathedral window design.

“I’ve been studying the history of stained glass windows and the emphasis seems to be on the glorification of god and not so much on the idea that god speaks to the people through the windows.”

“Well, the windows were created by man for god and not vice versa, so that makes sense,” offers Cosima. “Plus, there was a sort of competition when the great cathedrals of Europe were erected to build the most beautiful and expensive windows possible. It was part of an on-the-low ‘man glorifying himself’ thing going on between the cities, so of course no expense was spared. It was the medieval equivalent of the photo-op-with-the-underprivileged thing we have now. The real objective wasn’t anything so pure as the stated objective.”

Delphine picks up a piece of shrimp with her chopsticks and after swallowing says, “Well, that just confirms what I was thinking. I want to turn the focus of the windows on its head. I want to create
windows in which ‘god’ — she uses air quotes — speaks to the people. So I’ve been thinking about making the windows out of clear glass so that light shines in from outside and illuminates the interior instead of just illuminating the windows. If I use beveled glass, there will be a traveling prism effect as the sun changes position, and ‘god’ will move among the people. It’ll be really effective in Arizona with the bright sunlight there. And light will still get in on dark days.

“What I’m looking for now is your input on the order of the windows.” She pulls her leg up onto the chair, starting to feel excited about working out her idea.

“I have eight windows in the nave and one huge window behind the altar. So I was thinking of doing a series of winged creature from the Bible: seraphim, cherubim, the ravens that fed the prophets, the doves from Noah’s ark. That sort of thing. And behind the altar, the angels Gabriel and Michael glorifying the holy spirit, who is a dove. I want them to have huge uplifted wings so that the eye is drawn up. People should gasp when the light moves down the window at sunrise.”

Cosima’s face blooms as she listens. “That sounds awesome. I love the idea of having the windows be an intermediary instead of an end in themselves. It’s more meaningful. Speaking as a non-believer, of course. But I don’t know what you need me for. It seems like you have it worked out.”

“Well, I need to figure out how to order the nave windows. Randomly? In the order in which the winged creatures appear in the Bible? In order of strength or importance? In a way that makes the windows themselves look the best?”

“First, can we go back to the rainbows for a sec? Didn’t the rainbow after Noah’s ark have to do with a promise, god giving something to the people who worshipped him? With the rainbows that will be cast by the windows, there’ll be all kinds of symbolism going on: the angels and archangels and congregation praising god and god offering rainbows to the faithful. That’s a big turn-on for me I gotta say. You know I never met a symbol I didn’t like,” Cosima says grinning.

“Symbols, metaphors, similes, alliteration, hyperbole. You’re a total language slut,” Delphine teases.

“That's rich coming from a fine arts slut,” she teases back.

Delphine opens her mouth to expose what she is chewing and Cosima sniggers, “Classy. I’ve always loved see-food.”

“You’re welcome,” laughs Delphine. “So, the order?”

“Since the creatures are symbolic as well as corporeal -- if you believe in that sort of thing -- I think they should be arranged in the order of their proximity to the godhead, with the holiest closest to the altar. That way you can depict the traditional worship of god in a way that will appeal to the clergy and worshippers, in addition to highlighting god’s response from outside the windows.”

Delphine squirms in pleasure, pulling up her other foot and rising slightly on the chair seat before settling. “I’ve found out a lot of interesting things researching this,” she says. “Do you know the difference between seraphim and cherubim?”

Cosima shakes her head.

“Well, the seraphim are the highest. They guard god’s throne. They have six wings and fiery faces and they use two of their wings to shield their faces, two to shield their feet, and two to fly. They surround the throne and sing “Holy holy holy.”

“Holy cow,” jokes Cosima, and Delphine bursts into laughter and throws a piece of papaya at her before continuing.
“The cherubim are scarier, I think. Each has four faces: a lion, an eagle, an ox, and a man. Also, four conjoined eye-covered wings, the body of a lion, and the feet of an ox. I can’t wait to draw that. Can you imagine the sunlight pouring through the eyes?”

“That’s strangely and terrifyingly cool,” says Cosima. “Because, I mean, who knew? Cherubs are always depicted as little fat dudes with naked hineys. All those works from the masters will have to be updated. Michelangelo 2.0.”

Delphine throws another piece of papaya.

“Are you trying to make me fruitier,” Cosima laughs, leaning toward Delphine. “Because … already totally gay.”

“That would be gilding the lily, my dear,” replies Delphine, leaning forward to kiss her.

“But anyway,” Cosima continues, popping a piece of eggplant into her mouth with her fingers as she leans back. “The seraphim in the front and then the cherubim, minus the nakey butts, don’t you think?”

“Then the raven windows,” says Delphine. “On one side the ravens who fed the prophets and on the other Jesus feeding the ravens as a symbol of forgiveness. And then the doves. The sacrificial doves and Noah’s doves.”

“You sure know a lot about this.”

“Google is my friend,” laughs Delphine. “In fact, we’ve spent so much time together this last week we’re engaged.” She holds out her ring-less finger. “Virtual diamond.”

“Research is so sexy,” Cosima offers, relaxing her mouth and closing her eyes to make a god-you’re-hot face. After Delphine laughs she opens her eyes.

“Are you going to put the Bible verses under the windows?” she asks.

“What? What Bible verses?”

“You know. The verses that describe each creature, say their names. People might want to know. And the citations would help explain what’s going on in the designs. I totally vote for the verses.” Her grin is infectious.

“Leave it to you to work words into this,” Delphine jokes.

“Inserting the words is my mission in life,” says Cosima. “How ‘bout we go to bed and you let me insert some words into you?”

IV

Cosima has a way of softening her mouth that shoots straight to Delphine’s groin. She relaxes her lips until they feel swollen and yielding, evoking other lips, and Delphine wants to draw them into her mouth, to pull at and stroke them as though they will come with enough caressing. Cosima’s presentation of her mouth as a sexual organ is intentional and Delphine’s impulse is to absorb her, to turn and press and suck until Cosima’s entire mouth is in or on hers.

They are wet from previous love-making and sit pressed to each other, Cosima’s legs on top, kissing.
Delphine has pulled Cosima to her by the small of the back and can feel slick hair and thighs against her belly and sides. Their breasts stick and peel away as they pull apart occasionally to change the angle of their kissing and Delphine feels completely alive, her skin sensitized and her nipples tender. It’s like loading her brush from a saturated palette, this lovemaking; she wants to pull all she can feel into herself and then brush it out onto Cosima, to paint herself -- her impressions, emotions, and thoughts -- onto Cosima’s body in little strokes until her brush is dry.

Cosima is a wonderful lover -- attentive, responsive, and loving -- and when she touches her Delphine tries to stay out of her own head and in her body, which is flushed and pulsing with pleasure. Cosima is moving against her with little flicks of the hip and Delphine tightens her abdomen and pushes up with her own hips in the same rhythm, trying to provide enough contact to stimulate her. Occasionally a drop of sweat or lubrication falls onto her belly and she drops into her groin like a weight into a pond. So much sensation: she feels pressure, heat, wetness, and the deep vibration of sound in Cosima’s throat and diaphragm. She is too aroused to compose a complete picture, but she senses behind her closed eyelids darkness, vapor, and undulating waves of burgundy rolling across a textured, elastic hill.

Finally Cosima breaks the kiss and says breathily, “Oh, god. Touch me,” and scoots back just a bit. Delphine releases Cosima’s back and pulls her hand to the front, placing her thumb at the slick bead between Cosima’s legs. She moves it in slow circles, the rest of her fingers curled down toward the bed. She knows that her fingers and forearm will begin to burn before Cosima comes, but for now she revels in the sensations. She imagines her finger prints engorging and leaving troughs and mazes for Cosima’s wetness to wick through. She imagines touching Cosima’s individual nerves with the raised whorls, arousal sparking from body to body.

She removes her thumb and turns her hand palm up, sliding two fingers into her lover. Cosima tips back slightly to improve the angle and Delphine leans forward, unwilling to break contact. She strokes slowly and concentrates on the way the warm, yielding flesh sucks at her fingers. She feels her heart rise through her throat and settle in her tear ducts and Cosima blurs, reduced to color and movement and short, gasping exhalations of pleasure. Delphine presses on until eventually her eyes clear and she sees Cosima looking tenderly at her face. She realizes that although she can’t, she wants to put everything inside this woman: her fears, her talents, her sympathies, her memories, the moonlight, the paintings, the yellow pitcher.

She rises from the bed, accustomed to painting late into the night. Cosima is asleep and Delphine wants the time alone to think about the painting and perhaps rework it. She pads into the studio and once she has turned on the lights, checks back to make sure that Cosima is undisturbed. Cosima has turned over but she appears to be deeply asleep, her breathing slow and steady, her nose whistling a little because one nostril is slightly depressed by the pillow.

Delphine stands before the painting. It is a good painting, Cosima’s skin alive with light. The proportions are exactly correct. She has captured Cosima’s mien, even though her features are hidden by her arm, and the play of color, the softened realism, evoke the real person behind the paint. The painting is an impression of a woman in the prime of her life, a woman of heart and mind, a sexual being. Delphine is happy with the style she has chosen. She has solved the puzzle of how to reconcile the dark background with the light-filled colors of Impressionism. The painting is strong.

Despite this, Delphine is unhappy with it. Her instincts tell her that something is wrong. She turns the painting on its side, examines it, and then turns it back. What is she searching for? she wonders. The
painting is sellable. It’s innovative. It’s correct. She feels a sort of anxiety; even to the work that she considers to have failed, the work she paints over, she feels a connection. But she doesn’t feel anything but intellectual satisfaction for this piece. She gazes at it for quite some time. It looks the way she envisioned it. It looks in every detail like Cosima. It just doesn’t look like love.

Chapter End Notes

Here are snippets of the things Cosima was tested on.

Hear "Beowulf" read in Anglo-Saxon

Hear "Parlement of Foules" read in Middle English

A reading of Wilfred Owen’s "Dulce et Decorum Est", one of the poems explicated by Cosima in the 20th Century British Lit section of her exam. (By the way, Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori comes from Horace and means “It is a sweet and honorable thing to die for the fatherland.” Owen is being ironic, of course.)
I

She finds the note, in a violet glassine envelope the size of a business card, tucked into her coffee cup. Cosima must have left it on her way out to meet her parents for a trip to the farmer’s market. She’d promised to bring back Mexican sour gherkin cucumbers — *they look like tiny watermelons*, she’d explained -- and to teach Delphine to make pickles. It will be a lovely evening.

She opens the little envelope and inside is a piece of watercolor paper. It’s been torn so that its edges are deckled. On it is written in the beautiful green ink: *Just remember when you open your letter that I licked the envelope. I carried it in my pocket. I folded myself small so I would fit.* Delphine is confused. What letter? The glassine envelope is unsealed, so Cosima can’t have meant that. She walks around the loft looking for something from Cosima but doesn’t see anything, nothing tucked into or under something else. Perhaps it will come with the mail? She turns slowly to look one more time but finds nothing. Well, she thinks, she’ll find it eventually or she can ask Cosima when she returns. For now she puts the note into the pocket of her cardigan and goes to her studio to work. She forgets it almost immediately.

She is working on the submission proposal. In addition to the required electronic information about her designs, she’s chosen to create a paper version that shows all nine windows together. In this version, which she’s painting on an oversized sheet of artisan paper, the large apse window will be in the center of the composition, rendered in full color in oil pencil, and the eight nave windows, in pen and ink, will be arrayed around it, four on each side. Beneath each will be written in tiny script the name of the creature the window depicts and the Bible verse describing it. Finally, at the bottom of the composition will be a rectangular oil pencil drawing of the interior of the cathedral, speckled with
the refracted light from the windows.

Delphine has not enjoyed painting this much in ages. There are no emotions from which to hide, no sense of failure, just pure creative energy. She is aware of the irony, of course. She’s creating art that for a large part of the world would be filled with emotion and meaning, yet she is removed from this aspect of the work, painting without pain or care. It feels fantastic. She smiles when she chooses the music that will keep her company. Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Russian Easter” is by another non-believer who co-opted Christian subject matter, and the opening bassoon, flute, and oboe notes of the overture fill the loft before she’s even had a chance to sit down.

II

The pen and ink drawings of the nave windows are already complete; she has used only the barest bit of white and pale blue pencil to augment them. But the final rendering of the apse window awaits and she closes her eyes for a moment to visualize the magnificent beings she will draw. When she opens them, she reviews the sketches and references that she’s clipped to the drafting table and to her easel: drawings and paintings of wings, copies of faces that interest her, photographs of birds poised to fly or mate, and her final draft sketch of the window’s complete design. Near at hand are the materials of the windows themselves: beveled glass, etched glass, different thicknesses of window glass, and clear stained glass of various textures. Everything is coated with a UV film that will protect the church interior and its linens from being bleached by the sunlight. She has held these samples up to the loft windows many times to see how they look in proximity to each other and how they interact with sunlight. She is ready to begin.

Delphine works steadily through the morning, measuring, sketching, and refining her drawing. By lunchtime she is ready to rough-in the cames, the metal strips that will hold the pieces of glass in place. She’s certain that the bracing must be beautiful in itself, not merely a necessity. Designing the framework is key because every aspect of the windows, physical and symbolic, will fail without it. The splendid glass is dependent upon common lead and zinc, the ordinary sustaining and uplifting the extraordinary.

Incorporating what she has learned about the stresses that the glass must bear has been a challenge. She doesn’t usually have to consider this sort of thing and creating a work of art that has such physical restrictions is both exhilarating and frustrating. It’s not enough to design beautiful windows that represent the beliefs and needs of the congregation; they must also be structurally sound.

As she winds down for the day, Delphine imagines the windows without glass, the lattice of cames whistling as the wind blows through the cathedral. She forms a picture of them momentarily sparked orange from the sun, projecting their shadows into the sanctuary, the glass in shards on the floor. They are powerful, beautiful in that instant before they become ordinary again. They are briefly ascendant, speaking for god, before their eminence is stripped from them like a caul.

III

Delphine is exhausted, having worked for hours by the time Cosima returns. From her imagination a beautiful portrait has begun to form: Michael and Gabriel side by side with wings and hands outstretched toward the godhead. Their faces are reminiscent of pre-Raphaelite heroines, with strong noses and full lips. Michael wears armor in the Roman fashion because, as Delphine has learned, he is called the warrior prince of the angels. But while Delphine’s Michael is proportioned and muscular in a masculine way, there is a suggestion of breasts beneath his breastplate and his hands and face are graceful and delicate. Gabriel, god’s messenger, stands with head thrown back and shofar thrust toward heaven in an ecstasy of adoration. The beautiful hair and feet are decidedly feminine but the jaw is squared and the thighs and calves are bold.
Acknowledging each angel's role in heaven's hierarchy fits perfectly into her vision of the windows as mouthpieces for both god and man. But she likes her decision to subvert church patriarchy by deliberately obfuscating her angels' gender, her favorite contribution to the overarching theme.

After the Rimsky-Korsakov, Delphine had switched to Bach and Handel and is about Baroqued-out by the time afternoon traipses in, so when Cosima enters in a blast of energy, she happily turns her chair away from her drafting table and stands to help with the bags.

“The parental units send their greetings,” says Cosima. “They want to meet you.”

“What did you get?” replies Delphine, ignoring Cosima’s comment and reaching for a bag from which the green tops of some vegetable extend. “Ah, beets and carrots.”

“Rainbow carrots,” says Cosima, giving her a look without pursuing it. “And heirloom tomatoes, some gorgeous eggplant, and the little cukes.” She reaches into a bag and pulls out a couple of striped cucumbers that look like Lilliputian watermelons.

Delphine smiles. “Those are adorable. I’ve never seen such a thing.”

“They’ll make great pickles; you wait and see,” says Cosima. “And speaking of pickles, look what I brought you.”

She hands Delphine a bag containing a white paper-wrapped bundle and a bottle of something red. “A grinder -- extra pepperoncini and pickle -- and fresh cherry juice. You haven’t eaten, have you.”

It’s not a question.

“Oh, my god,” groans Delphine. “You’re the best!” And with that she marches to the kitchen table to tear into her sandwich. “I wuff deese,” she mumbles around an enormous mouthful when Cosima plops down across from her. “Duh zhou wa a bye?” she chokes out, checking to see if her intentional breach in manners is amusing -- and distracting -- Cosima.

“Tempting, mumble mouth. But I’ll pass,” Cosima laughs. “We had Greek for lunch.”

After a moment Delphine puts the sandwich down on the white, oil-stained paper and says, “I’m going need a nap after this.”

“Mmmm,” says Cosima. “A nap sounds awesome. But I should read.”

Delphine continues to eat and they chat about the various people and stalls Cosima saw at the farmers’ market. She mentions that there were even a few stands for artists but Delphine expresses skepticism that one could find anything much of interest there. Finally the sandwich whips her and she wraps up what’s left and crosses to put it in the fridge. Cosima goes to her for a hug but must hop sideways when she loses her balance.

“Wow, that was sexy,” Cosima laughs. “Have spatial dysmorphia, will travel.” Delphine cocks an eyebrow, totally confused. “It’s from an old TV show. Have Gun, Will Travel. Never mind. My dad always uses that tagline.” Delphine’s expression says ahh and this time she initiates a hug that isn’t a bit wobbly. They stand for a moment, rocking slightly.

“Can I see what you’ve done?”

Delphine takes her to the drafting table.

“This is wonderful, Delphine,” says Cosima, turning to her. “You’re so freaking good at this stuff. You’re like … a savant.” She gets a teasing look in her eyes and then her voice transforms into
Raymond Babbitt’s. “Ten minutes to Wapner. I’m an excellent driver.”

Delphine smiles because of Cosima’s accent but again she doesn’t understand the joke.

“Rain Man? Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise? Savant counts cards in Vegas with ne’er-do-well brother?”

Delphine shakes her head gently, grinning.

“Geez. Zero for two,” says Cosima, laughing. “Never mind. This is gorgeous. That’s all you need to know.”

IV

Before she settles for her nap, Delphine tilts Cosima’s book back so that she can read the cover.

“Walden. Do you like it?”

“I’ve read it before, but yes. ‘I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately….’ It’s great. Thoreau is super important to my dissertation.”

Delphine lies down, puts her cheek on Cosima’s thigh, and says sleepily, “I’ve never read it, but I know what it’s about. In a general way.” She closes her eyes. “Let’s make pickles in the morning. I’m too tired to do anything else now.”

“OK. That works for me.” Cosima brushes Delphine’s hair out of her face, rests her hand lightly on the crown of her head, and Delphine clicks off like a lamp.

When she awakens Cosima is still reading. Delphine’s eyes pop open and she says without preamble, “What time is it? Is it time to go?”

“Whoa there, cowboy. Welcome back from Nod,” says Cosima, dropping her arm from the back of the sofa to Delphine’s shoulder. “It’s Saturday. There’s nowhere you have to be.”

Delphine tries to process this information and then flips onto her back and yawns. “I thought it was time for class,” she says. “I must have been dreaming. I always have that dream where you’re late to class and you can’t find it. I hate that.”

“Me, too,” says Cosima. “But I’m usually naked as well. Super stressful.”

She tips her head back to look up at Cosima. “Did you get a lot done?”

“Yes, actually. One chapter of my dissertation is about how solitude sometimes results in self-reliance instead of loneliness so I’ve been deep into Walden for a while. Anyway, it’s a good read, so I’m also reading for pleasure.”

Delphine scrubs her face with her hands and sits up woozily, scoothing over to lay her head on Cosima’s shoulder. Her cheek is warm and her eyelids feel puffy.

After a moment, Cosima says, “I think we should do an art project together. I was thinking that we should do something that combines visual and language arts.”

“What brought this on?” asks Delphine.

Cosima laughs. “I had a sex dream about it.”
“What?” says Delphine, sitting up and turning toward Cosima with a smile. “When?”

“Not really. I’m just teasing. But I do want to do something together.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Well, I thought I might write on something that you painted?”

Delphine thinks about it. Does this idea of working together bother her? It’s not really the same as when she paints; she doesn’t have to bare her emotions to do a project with Cosima. Why not have fun together and share their art?

“How about we do body prints,” she says.

“Like … potato prints but with bodies?”

“Exactly.”

Cosima bursts into laughter.

Delphine pulls away slightly. “What?”

“Dirt in the skirt. Paint in the taint?”

Delphine shakes her head. “I don’t even want to know where that came from. Come on.”

“Do you mean like, right now?”

“Sure. I’ve got all the stuff.”

“OK,” said Cosima, laying down her book. “But maybe we should have sex first.”

“Art first, sex later.” Delphine laughs. “I promise.”

“Bummer, dude,” Cosima says. “But OK. Are you painting me or am I painting you?”

V

Delphine puts down a tarp and pulls over a roll of primed cotton canvas. She cuts three lengths of about four feet and lays one on the center of the tarp. While she gathers supplies, prepares the paint, and pulls up computer images of body prints for Cosima to see, she has Cosima paint the canvas black. They leave it to dry and Delphine explains how they will proceed, illustrating, by showing Cosima examples from the web, what they are trying to achieve. She has mixed several containers of acrylic paint: red ochre, cadmium red, and burgundy; dark cyan, traditional chartreuse, and spring green; a couple of oranges; cadet blue; and ochre. She has Cosima choose two. Cosima likes the spring green and light orange-red together.

Delphine explains that she’s added artist’s medium because without it the paint might not stay wet long enough to be useful. Nonetheless, they must work quickly and Cosima will need to shower between color changes. It will take several imprints to finish the three canvases, so she’ll be in and out of the water a number of times.

Since Cosima has never done printing before, they also decide to listen to music she hasn’t heard before, and Delphine chooses duets by Ry Cooder and V.M. Bhatt. Cosima ties her hair up and smiles as notes from a bottleneck guitar and mohan venal fill the loft. This harmony of taste between Cosima and her makes Delphine happy and spurs her to begin. She asks Cosima to stand on the tarp
and offers her a robe to keep her back warm during the prep.

“I’m fine for now,” says Cosima.

For the first print Delphine wants to make an angel, so she paints Cosima’s forearms and hands and, using only these parts of her body, helps her print a design of overlapping marks that fan out from a pivot point in the center of the canvas. The variety in the intensity of the paint and the slight movement between prints creates a very good impression of wings. For the angel’s body, Cosima will lie face down with her shoulders just atop the base of the wings, so that they appear to be rising from her back.

Delphine wants to capture Cosima only from pubis to face, so she starts painting at the groin. Her face is only inches from Cosima as she kneels in front of her and she realizes that she’s never been able to see Cosima this completely before. Her skin is golden, and the tiny, almost-invisible hairs on her torso and thighs are golden too. She thinks for the hundredth time how gorgeous she is and she feels a desire to possess her as she does other beautiful things. Impulsively she kisses the hair between Cosima’s legs and when Cosima reaches down to hold her in place, lays the flat of her hand there to calm her. Cosima’s scent rises.

She asks Cosima to spread her legs slightly to open the creases where her thighs meet her groin and she continues to apply the paint, moving quickly with her soft brush. When she reaches Cosima’s face she paints the right side from nose to ear, being careful around the eyes and hairline.

“You are so beautiful,” she whispers and kisses the side of her mouth that is not painted. “You ready?” Cosima smiles and nods.

Delphine steps back. “The actual printing part may be difficult. I need you to kneel on the floor and lower yourself bit by bit until you are lying down. I want your cheek to the floor and your hands at the small of your back, not touching the canvas; you won’t be able to brace yourself. Do you trust me to support you going down?”

“Are you strong enough, do you think?” asks Cosima.

“I won’t let you fall but if you feel unsafe, put your hands out or roll to your shoulder. The print doesn’t matter,” Delphine explains.

“Let’s do it,” says Cosima. She kneels and Delphine steps behind her.

“Give me your hands,” she instructs, and she pulls Cosima’s arms gently back. “Here we go. Lean forward. I’m going to support you as you go down. I won’t drop you, OK?”

As Cosima relaxes and lets herself lean forward, Delphine lowers her little by little, shuffling her feet so that she can maintain her balance. When Cosima is down completely Delphine gently presses on every place where her body touches the canvas and then says, “Don’t move.” She trots to the living room for a stack of heavy books and then places a few on each side of the canvas beside Cosima’s head.

“Sorry. I should have thought of this before. I want to get you off this canvas before you start to stick and we’ve got to hold the canvas down as I pull you up.

“If it hurts let me know and we’ll stop, OK?”

She stands over Cosima, pulls her arms back again, and shuffling backward and applying pressure with her feet, pulls Cosima to her knees and then helps her get up.
“Totally cool,” grins a paint-covered Cosima as she looks at her body’s impression.

“It is, isn’t it?” says Delphine, who is very pleased with the result. “We’re not done yet but it’s a good start. I want to add an arm. But we’ll do that later after this part dries.

“Go take a good shower,” she says and gives Cosima a little peck on the clean cheek. “You did great.”

They continue to experiment long into the night, Cosima being painted and then showering, while Delphine plays with the prints by overpainting, sometimes adding shading or highlights and sometimes, while Cosima washes, swirling another color into the still-wet paint. The angel print is gorgeous without embellishment, however, and she leaves it alone, merely allowing it to dry. At about 2 a.m. they decide to do one last print of both of them together and Delphine goes first, lying on her back and making a dark teal impression. Cosima’s print is on top in black, arranged in the famous John Lennon/Yoko Ono bed-in-for-peace pose. When they are finished they stand, both covered in drying paint, and look at their work, happy with their evening together and what they have produced.

Delphine starts toward the shower first and as she nears her bedroom asks Cosima to flip off the studio lights. When she turns around because the lights have not been extinguished, she sees Cosima dancing with middle fingers pointed at the light switch, enjoying her pun. Delphine’s heart swells with affection.

VI

Delphine keeps her promise despite the late hour. They curl in bed, still damp from the shower, kissing and talking. Both are fully awake.

“Have you ever thought about how different your art is from mine? I mean, the way people interact with visual arts versus language arts?” ask Cosima.

“Not in any depth, why?”

“Being around you has made me think about it.”

“And?”

Cosima shifts onto her back and pulls Delphine onto her shoulder. She kisses the crown of her head. “Well, in the language arts, more effort and time is required on the part of the reader to interact with it. It might take 15 hours to read a novel, whereas it takes less time to view a painting.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Delphine counters. “I can read a novel for a short amount of time and get a general sense of its style and the voice of the author. I can’t know everything, but I can tell if I want to read more. On the other hand, people think they can walk by a painting or stand for two minutes and ‘get it.’” She gestures to accompany her slightly offended tone of voice. “Visual arts are as full of symbolism and careful crafting as poems and essays and novels are. At least some are. If you look at the paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they are full of symbols. The types of birds have meaning, the colors of robes have meaning, whether a figure is facing forward or is in profile has meaning. You can read a painting just like a piece of literature and you can’t really do it in two minutes.”

“True,” says Cosima, “I didn’t mean to imply that the visual arts are less complex. But you can get a greater sense of a painting or statue in a few seconds than you can with a novel. I think you have to read it, at least part of it, to get any sense of its actual art. I mean, I might like the first paragraph of
Middlemarch but I’m not going to know a thousandth of its art unless I read well into it.” She pauses to see if Delphine is offended. “It’s not a value judgement. It’s just the way it is.

“I mean, I know it must annoy the crap out of you when someone gives your art five seconds of their time and then walks on. I get that.”

“Not if they buy it, it doesn’t,” Delphine teases, a little embarrassed by her former snippiness. She cups Cosima’s breast and squeezes lightly.

Cosima leans down to kiss Delphine’s now upturned face and Delphine touches her tongue lightly to her lips before letting her go. Cosima drops back to the pillow. “Let me just finish this thought. And you can’t distract me with that tongue action. I know how you arty types work.”

Delphine smiles and bats her eyelashes, which she suspects Cosima can’t really see.

“So anyway,” Cosima continues. “What I was saying is that people don’t generally go to a library or a bookstore to look at the covers for a minute each and then go for coffee. A reader opens and interacts with a book in a more invested way right from the beginning.”

“But you’re forgetting that even if a people don’t always linger in a gallery, they might spend quite a lot of time looking at paintings that hang in their homes.”

“Or they might buy them because they match their sofas,” counters Cosima.

“That makes me crazy,” says Delphine. “A woman once brought me a decorative pillow and commissioned me for a painting that matched it.”

“And you were too offended to take it,” guesses Cosima.

“Fuck no,” snorts Delphine. “I need to eat. I painted the hell out of that pillow commission.”

Cosima snickers and turns to face Delphine. They kiss for a while, laughing and murmuring. “Also you can quote from a piece of literature. You can’t quote from a painting. You can’t share it with someone without … ” Cosima continues against Delphine’s mouth until Delphine really starts to laugh.

“That is so adorable,” she teases. “Look at you defending the language arts.”

Suddenly Cosima flips Delphine onto her back and straddles her, holds her hands over her head.

“Say Uncle. Say that language arts are the best,” she demands.

“In your dreams, poetry girl.”

“Pffft,” mocks Delphine. “Your poetry has no effect on my pleasure.”

“Poetry is pleasure,” says Cosima, lowering her voice and kissing Delphine’s throat. “Sex is all about poetry.”

“I’ve had lots of sex and none of it included poetry,” Delphine scoffs. “I’m pretty sure I would remember.”

“That’s not true. I’ll prove it.” Cosima nips the tender skin beneath Delphine’s ear, her collarbone, and then down to her breast before releasing her hands and sitting up. Delphine’s giddiness flutters
toward arousal.

“Poetry has many components. Words, symbols, rhyme schemes. But just like sex it also has an inherent rhythm called the ‘meter.’” She begins to rock her hips against Delphine’s thighs in a rhythm that is clearly measured.

“Meter is divided into feet and each foot has a particular signature. Iambs are the poetic feet that sound like your heartbeat. da DUH. da DUH. da DUH.” She taps on Delphine’s chest in time with her words. “Feel the difference between the beats? Soft, hard. Soft, hard. Soft, hard. When we make love our hearts race, but they keep the same rhythm. da DUH. da DUH. da DUH. Just faster.”

With this Cosima pulls Delphine’s hand to her chest and presses it over her heart. “Can you feel it? Can you feel how the natural rhythm of my heart feels like an iamb?”

Delphine nods. She thinks for a moment that she would like to see Cosima’s heart beating, would like to press that heart against her sex, where its steady, strong beat would pound her to the promised orgasm. She groans a little at the image and Cosima pulls her palm up for a kiss and then pulls Delphine’s fingers into her mouth, sucking and licking at them until Delphine begins to squirm in anticipation.

Cosima begins to rock again against her thighs and Delphine pulls her hand away and reaches between Cosima’s legs.

“When you are wet like this,” she murmurs, “I want to come out of my skin. I want to paint this all over us.”

Cosima rocks against her fingers for a few moments and then takes Delphine’s fingers away from herself and places them between Delphine’s legs.

“The second poetic foot is the trochee. It’s the opposite of the iamb. It’s hard; soft; hard; soft; hard, soft. DUH da. DUH da. DUH da. This is the meter of fucking.” And with this she slides off Delphine’s thighs and lays beside her, placing her hand atop Delphine’s, still at her groin. “Spread your legs,” she whispers.

Delphine knows what is coming and she arches her hips up slightly in impatience. Sure enough, Cosima matches her fingers to Delphine’s and guides their middle fingers into her. The stroking is forceful and Cosima whispers “DUH da. DUH da. DUH da.” in time with their movement. After a few moments Cosima stops speaking but the rhythm continues to echo in Delphine’s brain. She doesn’t know if it is the idea of this piece of Cosima language inside her or the position, but she feels herself rising faster than usual. She knows that it won’t take long for Cosima to pull her to a poetic conclusion.

Their hands continue to move between her legs, the slap of their fingers, the snick of her arousal, and the catch of her breath at the deepest moment of the strokes taking on an importance that amplifies the burning in her feet and the growing stimulation in her belly. She presses with her thumb as best she can to stimulate herself. Cosima continues to guide her, surging forward in a hard beat and withdrawing in a soft one. Delphine is close, so powerfully close after only a few minutes. When Cosima’s hot breath kisses her ear she is nearly at the place from which she cannot return.

“Now the amphibrach,” whispers Cosima. “Very rare. Three beats. da DUH da. da DUH da. da DUH da. This is the most poetic foot of all. It’s what drives everything when we fuck.”

She is there. She is going to come.
Cosima next words are full of emotion that Delphine can feel as the waves of pleasure surge up her legs and into her groin.

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.’ Can you hear it? All of this is poetry. Sex is driven by these rhythms.

"I love you. Just you, Delphine. I won’t share you. I won’t leave you. I can’t,” says Cosima. And with that Delphine stops hearing anything but the rushing of blood in her ears.

When she catches her breath she pulls her hand away and swings her legs over the side of the bed and says in a shaky voice that is filling with tears, “I need you to leave. Please, Cosima. Please go.”

Cosima is clearly shocked and sits up, saying, “What’s wrong?” She begins to argue but Delphine rises and goes into the bathroom and closes the door. She can hear Cosima moving around the bedroom and she stands braced against the sink, heaving with unhappiness. How has she gotten to this place again? How can she be so afraid? She has done all she can to avoid these feelings but here she is, wanting to run, to weep, to lay down and not get up.

Cosima does not leave and Delphine can hear her sniffing against the door. “Please, Delphine. Tell me what’s wrong,” she begs. But there is no resolution. The separated lovers churn on either side of the door until eventually Delphine hears Cosima gather her things and leave.

When Delphine enters her studio the next day, she sees that Cosima has left a messy note on her drafting table.

I think that if I loved you any more
my heart would burst like diamonds
into a cathedral of glass.

I’d lie on my back and look through the spire
straight into the eye of God.

I’d sing out your comings and goings
on bells
like goblets,
ringing, ringing.

Please don’t do this.

The print of their bodies pressed together is gone. The hole it’s left on the tarp seems as big as the world.

Chapter End Notes

Here is a sample of the music Delphine plays while she and Cosima make body prints:
Ry Cooder and VM Bhatt, "Ganges Delta Blues"

These are examples of different styles of body prints. I found them useful in describing what Delphine and Cosima try to produce in their joint art session:

Julian Jay Roux, "Angels and Gods"
Body Prints - Artisan Framing & Gallery
Patte Ormsby body prints, Torso series
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

"I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself." — Diane Arbus

Chapter Notes

I’ve said before that it takes a village to write and edit one of these chapters. This time it took a major metropolitan area and two suburbs. Thanks to femadeofstardust for a very long conversation about Cosima and her backbone, trylonandperisphere for fresh eyes, JanGoo for help with the French, OrphanZero for two (!) covers, and the wonderful mlleclaudine for nitpicking. And thank all of you for your support and encouragement, without which I would have quit doing this a long time ago.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[04:32 a.m.]

Delphine knows Cosima’s voice mail greeting well. But today it sounds like a message from Mars: familiar but distant. “George Bernard Shaw said: ‘The biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.’ So, like, make it real and leave a message.” Beep.

“Hey. It’s me. Can we talk? Can you call me back?”

[04:50 a.m.]

“George Bernard Shaw….”

“Cosima, it’s me again. I know you’re mad. You have every right to be. Please call me back.”

[04:54 a.m.]

“George…. ” She hangs up. Surely Cosima isn’t asleep but is screening. Perhaps she will answer a text.

To Cosima [04:55 a.m.]: Will you let me apologize at least?

To Cosima [05:38 a.m.]: Are you awake?

To Delphine [05:39 a.m.] Leave me alone for a while.

I

The loft smells like wood, coffee, paint, and dust, and from where she is lying in bed, Delphine can
also smell sex. It chastises her, teased by her body heat from the sheets in which only a few hours before she had been shivering with arousal as Cosima made love to her with her hands and with her words. Now, although she hadn’t tried to rest until after sunrise, Delphine cannot manage to close her eyes. She feels shaky and faint.

Delphine is paralyzed by a bone-sick awareness that she has orchestrated a self-fulfilling prophecy of her worst fear. She is sure that she has caused what she has been trying to forestall all along: she has fallen in love with Cosima and now Cosima will leave her. How can she not after Delphine’s unforgivable behavior? Delphine’s denial, her hiding, her conviction that holding back a piece of herself would protect her from truly loving Cosima has brought her to that very place. How foolish she has been to try to orchestrate her feelings and, by extension, her lover’s. Regardless of the fact that Cosima may not leave today, Delphine is sure she has pierced her so cruelly that eventually the love will leak out and Cosima’s heart will stop beating for her. Its inevitability underlies any effort she can make to repair the damage.

*What is wrong with me,* she thinks? She hates this person, this needy — and now apparently unkind — woman who demands solitude but isn’t happy within it. She can’t deny that her anxiety has been real. But she barely recognizes the self she’s been seeking to protect. She’s always been solicitous of others, accommodating rules and demands and feeling guilty when any sort of expectation is unfulfilled. She has always been a nice, a generous person. Why is she now skittish and self-protective? Why can’t she admit that she wants to be loved and risk reaching for it?

Since Isabelle, Delphine has been flailing. In daily living, in her interior life, and now in her relationship with Cosima, she’s been struggling to find her way. She feels poised between worlds, not knowing whether she can return to the happiness of self-sufficiency or must push forward to find it somewhere — or in someone — else. Looking backward seems safe but futile; moving ahead is terrifying. Without direction she has lost herself. She’s felt like a spectre, sometimes pushing through her emotional death from Isabelle to work and to be present with Cosima and then disapparating into an interior world of anxiety and doubt. She thinks that if this goes on much longer her old self will disappear altogether.

Still, Delphine loves Cosima. She knows she does, and strange as it seems, the vehemence with which she reacted to Cosima’s declaration has proven how much. Facing Delphine is the thing that signals the inescapable. She fears that the acknowledgement of love marks the pivot into loss. Cosima has offered her love and forced the issue. Now Delphine must confront her own feelings. And the truth about her feelings? She’s far enough in love that she can’t run anymore. She can’t stop loving Cosima, whatever her fears. All she can do is try to fix things enough that Cosima will stay a little longer.

II

She lies in bed for two hours and then gets up, unable to sleep and unwilling to allow herself to linger. She goes to her studio, hoping she can calm herself with work. But once she has dressed and has stepped into the space with a cup of coffee, she is confronted by the body prints. For a few seconds she is divorced from their content and sees only their form. She creates a composition: shadows, colored castings that have no source, dimensionless people attached to nothing. It spooks her. She hurriedly stacks the prints, folds the tarp, and puts it all out of sight. Once she thinks about it she feels better that Cosima has taken the print of them together, certain that it belongs with her.

When she sits at her drafting table her thoughts circle Cosima and she pushes back at them and tries to focus on the cathedral. The drawing is almost complete and she is happy with it. She has perfectly
captured the look of glass and the hints of refracted light. Her design is a success. It’s a combination of romanticism and realism, styles that should be antithetic but instead give the windows a focus both backwards and forward, a feeling that embraces both tradition and modern interpretation. Her design is a model of duality, of juxtaposition, of compromise. It’s a dialogue between unlike beings across a membrane of glass. She cannot see the irony that she has birthed this idea at a moment when she cannot apply the same perspective to her life. She has created with intellect and passion but not insight.

To finish she has only to write in the descriptions under each window, and so she takes up her Rapidograph to change to a small nib. She places an index card containing the explanation of the cherubim directly above the space onto which she will copy its contents and begins to write. As her best tiny writing emerges letter by letter she thinks she can smell Cosima on her hands and her mind drifts. She snaps to attention and pushes her chair away from the drafting table. She cannot be careless now, cannot ruin the weeks of work she’s put into this project. Fuck, she thinks. Will she destroy everything in her life in one day?

III

Over the next few days Delphine becomes more composed and when she calls Cosima again she is calm. This time Cosima answers. Delphine asks her to come over or, if that does not suit, offers to go to her apartment. Cosima is cool on the phone, a tone Delphine has never heard her use before. Hours later when Cosima arrives at the loft she knocks instead of just entering, something she has not done for weeks. Her jaw is set when Delphine opens the door.

Delphine is not sure what to do in the uncomfortable moments just after Cosima enters. The look on her lover’s face is pinched but her makeup is perfect and she is dressed beautifully, unlike Delphine, who is in jeans, an old flannel shirt, and her cardigan. Delphine clears her throat and asks her sit down. When they go to the living room, Cosima takes off her red coat and throws it over the back of the sofa. They sit. It is the first time in months that they do not touch each other in greeting.

“Would you like some tea or something?” Delphine asks. Cosima shakes her head and Delphine thinks that her eyes look tired behind the eyeliner and shiny glasses.

Delphine is both relieved and unnerved at having Cosima back in the loft. It’s been less than a week since she left, but the energy between them feels different, tighter maybe, where once it was sweet and easy.

“Cosima...” Delphine begins, “I appreciate your coming. I wasn’t sure you would.”

Cosima gives her a level, lips-pursed, silent look, and Delphine experiences several emotions: desire, nervous anxiety, and guilt that the Cosima whom she knows well after these months together seems to be altered, her demeanor and posture different...coiled. Even her hands, normally so fluid and expressive, lie tense on her thighs. Delphine knows these changes are her fault.

“How have you been?”

The moment the words are out, Delphine regrets them. Cosima’s mouth turns down in an exasperated frown. Delphine knows that she has offended with the stupidity of the question and her formality. Still, she’s flustered by the importance of this conversation and her responsibility for making it necessary. Everything she thought she wanted to say has become more fraught with Cosima’s physical presence, yet her thoughts are more tangled. She doesn’t know how to explain herself. Or perhaps she is just unwilling, now that Cosima is before her, to initiate what will most
certainly be painful. After a moment in which she tries to find something to say that won’t be offensive, she starts again.

“I’m sorry this is awkward. It’s hard to know where to start. It’s not that I don’t know what I need to say, I just can’t seem to….” Cosima’s face remains stony.

“Look, you have every right to be angry,” she says. “I know you must wonder what is going on, why I…well…why I would be so upset when you were being so loving.”

“No, Delphine. I’m not curious about why you were or are upset.” Cosima’s tone is red. Her anger, although righteous, is startling.

“But, I ruined it,” stammers Delphine, who realizes after she has spoken what Cosima really means.

“I want to know why you think hurting and humiliating me is OK.”

Delphine places her hands in her lap and she looks down at them, feeling slightly faint. She wonders for a moment if she might need to put her head down. She looks at Cosima’s lips, which twitch slightly as she compresses them, and scoots forward in the chair. She leans toward Cosima, elbows on her thighs.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she says softly.

“What the fuck, Delphine! You threw me out in the middle of sex!”

“I’m so sorry, Cosima. I didn’t know I was going to do it. It was like…a reflex…sort of.” She extends her hand, even though she knows she can’t reach Cosima from her place on the chair.

“Can you even comprehend how much it hurt to have you reject me when I was so open to you? I was sharing the things that mean everything to me, Delphine. And you…. I can’t believe that you did that.”

Delphine, who has been chastising herself for days for this very thing, truly understands for the first time just how hurt Cosima is by her rejection. She sees underneath Cosima’s anger her pain at feeling unloved, recognizing in it her own wretchedness from the time after Isabelle left her. When she speaks she is completely sincere.

“I’m so sorry. It just happened. It wasn’t a conscious decision.”

“Bullshit. You pulled my hand away. You got out of bed. You had plenty of time to stop yourself.”

Delphine bites at her lip and stops trying to explain. She should just apologize and try to repair the damage she’s done.

“No, you’re right. There’s no excuse. It was rude and un--”

“Rude?” Cosima interrupts. “Your primary concern is that your manners were bad?”

Cosima pops up off the sofa and grabs her coat. “You need to get your head out of your ass before we can have this conversation.” She turns to leave. She’s been in the loft less than five minutes.

“Tell me what will make you feel better, Cosima. I behaved badly. I let my panic get the better of me.” She gets to her feet. “Please stay.”

Cosima pauses as she seems to consider whether or not to leave. Delphine expects her to sit.

“I need a couple of days to cool off because this is not acceptable.” Cosima gesticulates that she’s
had enough, showing her palms and then dropping them. “And you need to figure out what you want out of all this, because I obviously read you wrong. Let me know when you’ve got your shit together.” And with that she turns and walks toward the door.

Delphine follows, frantically thinking of how she can convince Cosima to stay. “Please, don’t go. Let’s just talk this out.”

“You won’t like what I have to say so I’m going to leave before I say something I can’t take back.”

Delphine gets to the door and reaches to pull it open but Cosima has beaten her to it, so she shoves her hands into the pockets of her cardigan, not knowing what else to do with them. She finds the little envelope that Cosima had left in her coffee cup and pulling it out, places her hand on Cosima’s shoulder. The muscles are tense, and when Cosima turns her head to look at Delphine’s hand, the tendons in her neck stand out. “What?” she barks.

“Nothing. Never mind,” says Delphine, setting the envelope next to her key bowl and crossing her arms over her chest in defeat.

Cosima turns back. When she sees the envelope she sighs and her anger appears to turn sad.

“What is it?” asks Delphine.

“The letter,” she says, her hand gesturing to the envelope.

“I never received a letter.”

“You did. I sent it a long time ago.”

“I didn’t get it, Cosima.”

Cosima sighs again and looks down for a moment.

“It’s this, Delphine. This thing between us.” She gestures back and forth between them. “It was my letter to you. I’ve been writing it for weeks. Pages and pages.”

Delphine is stunned.

“I folded myself for this relationship. I accommodated your boundaries. I sent myself into your world.” She raises her head to look Delphine in the eyes. “I gave you my words.” She shifts her weight and tilts her cheek toward her shoulder, her defiant posture softened. “All of this has been a love letter to you. And you didn’t read it. You didn’t write back.”

“That’s not true, I...”

“No, Delphine. It is true.” When Delphine begins to speak Cosima quiets her with a raised hand.

“I’ve tried to give you what you need. I know that Isabelle hurt you and that we started our relationship almost immediately after. I know that you’re gun shy. But I can’t help that that’s when we met. This is when the universe threw us together and it can’t be changed. I don’t think I should be punished because the timing was bad.” Delphine wants to speak, to reassure her, but knows she shouldn’t interrupt.

Cosima is looking her in the eyes. “I’ve been really patient. I’ve let about a million things slide. And I can’t do it anymore.”

Delphine’s stomach dips. Is Cosima leaving for good, right now, right this moment? She reaches to
touch her arm but Cosima shrugs her off. “Don’t,” she commands.

Cosima puts her hands behind her head, paces away and then back. When she lowers her arms her voice is firm. “I’m part of this relationship too. I’m a person all on my own. You’ve got to stop seeing me only as I relate to you. My existence, my feelings are not an adjunct to yours. My being pissed off is not merely a stimulus for whatever you’re feeling.”

Cosima steps into the doorway but does not go through and Delphine remembers when she had first come to the loft. How beautiful she had been, how full of life and happiness. She remembers her framed by the same doorway, framed by a piece of black canvas, and later still, spread on the bed, where the edges had framed her like an animate piece of art. Delphine’s eyes fill as Cosima continues.

“I love you, Delphine. You’re smart and beautiful and talented. But sometimes you go so far into your head that I can’t pull you out. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to.”

“I’m sorry,” says Delphine. “I don’t mean to be distant. I just…I’ve been confused. And afraid. I was certain you’d tire of me and leave and it seemed easier not to allow you to touch that part of me that would care.” She looks down. “I’ve never been like this before.”

She wants to embrace Cosima. She wants to enfold her and demonstrate her remorse with her body. She is desperate for Cosima to understand and to find some comfort in her words.

“I know I’ve been a mess. But I love you. I do,” Delphine says. “And I know now that I want to be with you. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize how much I want it.’

“You’re so sincere in your loving, Cosima. I’ve been afraid to want you and also afraid that I wouldn’t be able to love you enough. When you said you loved me I panicked. All the emotion of the moment, your intensity, your words. I wanted it so much and was terrified as well.” Delphine searches Cosima’s face for a hint of understanding. “Running away was a mistake. A horrible, stupid mistake.”

Delphine feels her love for Cosima well-up again, feels a sort of choking flush that constricts her chest and lodges in her throat and eyes. When she speaks again her voice wavers.

“You deserve to be loved without restraint or borders, Cosima. You deserve truthfulness and promises that are kept and the forever kind of love. And if I’m truthful, I don’t know if I can give you that, even though I want to. Isabelle changed me.”

“I never asked you to love me forever, Delphine”, Cosima says sadly. ”I only asked you to love me forever for an hour.”

Cosima reaches out to touch Delphine’s arm and rests her fingers there. They stand that way for a moment before Cosima squeezes and lets go. When she exits the loft, the ochre door closes with a gentle thump.

IV

Picking at wounds is never easy, even when the hurt must be lanced. And the high emotions of love, anger, and shame make healing harder. It’s several days before they talk again and several more before they reach a point of stasis, both able to speak honestly about their feelings, both resolved to continue their love affair. Cosima had been hesitant at first, she the one fearing a broken heart this time. And Delphine, after her first flush of optimism, had been deflated by Cosima’s reticence.
But Delphine is determined to join together what has been cracked. She begins to spend more time at Cosima’s apartment, aware that Cosima’s always coming to her sends an unspoken message. She takes food. They talk about what they want and need, how they have been hurt by others and each other, how to forgive and heal. They talk about goals and whether they fit together to pursue those goals. They talk and touch and find themselves again, saying what they feel and acknowledging that they can’t abandon each other.

Delphine doesn’t transform immediately, but her old self becomes corporeal again, reminding her that she is worth caring for. And during the process of regaining her footing, her love for Cosima blooms, unfolding with respect and gratitude. Cosima is her person, she thinks, the person who knows her best and loves her for herself, the person who challenges and supports her, the person with whom she can imagine challenging conversations and comfortable routines. Cosima is worth risking her heart for. Perhaps letting go of her boundaries isn’t so bad, she thinks. Perhaps Cosima will make her stronger instead of laying her low. In any case, she is ready to try.

Delphine has found her model, the subject about whom she can imagine creating a million pictures, limitless snapshots both familiar and astonishing, wonderful moments that will form and dissolve but never really disappear.

The idea to paint Cosima without looking at her had been Cosima’s suggestion. As they had been finding their way back together, Cosima had revealed that she needed Delphine to see her with more than her eyes. Perhaps they could connect in a more abstract, less baggage-ridden way, she had explained, by interacting in a less conventional way. Now they sit facing each other, the outside of their thighs pressed together, Delphine at her easel with Cosima to her left. A couple of sheets have been strung between them and Delphine can reach between them to touch Cosima without being able to see her. The easel holds a prepared canvas and there are no brushes or palette knives. Delphine will use only her fingers. Her tubes of paint and loaded palette are to her right on a card table.

Delphine is completely dependent upon sight when painting. Except during her first experiences in art school where the students explored the musculature of each other’s shoulders and arms with closed eyes as part of their beginning drawing classes, she has painted mostly what she has seen. She learned quite a bit during those early tactile anatomy exercises, but since then she has not explored creative application of any of her senses except sight. It feels freeing — and strange — to diverge now from what she knows so well. And she is taking Cosima with her as she explores, Cosima, the person she has most consciously excluded from this aspect of her life. Delphine is ready for this change. She wants to enjoy the experience, and to trust herself and Cosima as they step together into that place she has kept hidden.

Delphine reaches between the sheets and allows Cosima to guide her hand to her face. She rests it there and they both close their eyes. Delphine concentrates on the feel of Cosima’s skin, on her warm exhalations, on the curve of her cheek. She sits still, an explorer and not a painter, experiencing the touching without trying to equate what she feels to proportions or dimensions or shapes. She wants to see Cosima through touch before she paints her, to find her through fingers not focused on pleasure but on perception. And strangely, she wants to experience Cosima not only as herself but as all women. She wants to find something real about Cosima that she need not validate with her eyes, something she does not yet know; she wants to see her as part of the universe, created from the same stardust as Delphine herself and sharing with Delphine and all people a commonality underneath her uniqueness. Then she will transform that knowledge into art.
She rests her hand on Cosima’s cheek for some time, the flesh that comprises Cosima’s features smooth against her palm and fingers. Her lover sits patiently, eyelids fluttering occasionally, and after a few minutes Delphine moves her hand lower, placing her thumb on Cosima’s lips. Cosima kisses it and then quiets and Delphine smiles, rubbing Cosima’s lips gently before stilling her hand again. Delphine relaxes and falls deep into her thoughts, trying to imagine what Cosima’s face means with regard to the rest of her self. Beyond the traditional and trite connections between, say, intellect and the forehead, or between lips and sensuality, what does this face tell her? What about Cosima is in the texture of her skin, in her sharpish chin, in her perfectly-shaped ears? Can she know this person better just by touching her face?

When she is ready to begin she pulls her arm down to rest it and explains to Cosima how she will be working. “If you become uncomfortable with what I am doing or you need to rest, let me know,” she says. Then she begins the process of feeling the dimensions of Cosima’s face. Using her forefinger, she feels for the length of Cosima’s forehead from hairline to the bridge of her nose and then from the bridge of the nose to its tip. She moves around her face, stroking and estimating, pressing with fingertips to determine skin thickness, running her thumb over philtrum and nostrils, cheeks and eyebrows. When she has her bearings she dips her right thumb into blue paint and begins to lay out on her canvas the general contours and outlines of Cosima’s face. She stops frequently to let her left arm rest and she and Cosima exchange a few words. She tries not to paint from the memory of how Cosima looks but from the reality of how Cosima feels and from the emotions that touching Cosima raise in her. She chooses colors based on cooler and warmer places on Cosima’s skin, she chooses highlights based on what feeling each place on Cosima’s face raises in her. She lets herself paint by instinct, not aiming for visual realism but for the truth of Cosima, a truth she is only now starting to realize.

She paints for about an hour and eventually she does not need to touch Cosima anymore. Delphine tells Cosima that she can watch but that she needs to stay behind her and so Cosima comes around the drape, carrying her stool. If she is surprised by what she sees she does not say so and Delphine goes back inside her head. When she has finished she turns around to find Cosima grinning at her. Cosima rises from her stool and takes Delphine in her arms.

“Thanks for doing this,” Cosima says into Delphine’s neck.

“Thank you for sitting so patiently. You are a wonderful model,” says Delphine, who kisses her on the temple and then the cheek. They turn together to look at the painting.

“Is that what you think I look like?” Cosima asks, laughing.

“No, this is what you feel like,” says Delphine. “But yes, this is you. And this is also how I feel about you.”

“I like it,” says Cosima. “It totally doesn’t look like a photo.”

“No,” agrees Delphine, smiling. It doesn’t look like a photo. It looks like love.

They sit side by side on the edge of Delphine’s bed. Delphine turns a little and places the flat of her hand on Cosima’s back.

“I’m sorry,” she says again. “You’re a wonderful lover and I’m sorry I put that memory into this bed.”
Cosima smiles and squeezes her thigh. “Obliviate,” she commands, waving a pretend wand with her other hand. “It’s forgotten.”

Delphine leans to her and, mouth soft, kisses every bit of her lips.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you right back,” says Cosima.

Their lovemaking is less intense this time, more tender. They kiss for longer, interlock fingers, put their hands in each other’s hair. They whisper and laugh, Cosima teasing that they are “the boss hair couple in this town.” Delphine tells Cosima which parts of her body she finds most beautiful and she spends a long time looking at and caressing each. She attends to all of Cosima’s flesh, turning her over to kiss her back, to run her teeth gently up her spine, and to nip at her shoulders and buttocks. This woman, she thinks. I want to paint her all over me.

It is a funny thing, she observes briefly as she dips to take Cosima into her mouth, how the heart can crack and chip and continue beating. It continues beating, and its pulse is as strong and as fervent as it ever was.

VII

She sets the container of flowers just in front of Cosima’s door and props an envelope against it.

Dear Cosima,

I feel that I should send you a letter after the many beautiful words you have given to me and after you explained how loving me was like writing a letter to someone you thought might never write back. So this is me writing back. I am writing a real letter instead of speaking these words so that you will have them to touch once they have been offered.

I have been thinking quite a lot about how to tell you what you mean to me. I hope you will forgive the inevitable art metaphor but it’s the best way for me to explain. There is a phrase that we use to describe how colors transform when mixed together. In French we’d say that the color is “une couleur composée qu’on ne peut pas redissocier” or perhaps, more succinctly, “homogène.” In English I believe you would say “miscible” or “homogeneous.” In either language, however, the concept is the same. When one mixes paint, colors combine to become a new color that cannot be broken back into its original parts. Unlike something like the sea that can be returned to minerals and water, orange paint cannot be made red and yellow again.

It is the same with us, I think. I will never be just Delphine now but will always be a person changed by having known and loved you. Part of you is in me and will always stay there. This is what people mean when they talk about feeling completed, I suppose. But I do not feel completed so much as transformed, always myself but also, now, a different person.

There is much I could say about the fact that I am in love with you. You a wonderful and beautiful woman. My life is full of passion and joy and…color…because of you. So, I will tell you only that I fell in love with you because I could not help myself, no matter how I tried to protect my heart. Loving you was an inevitability. I hope to show you through my actions how much you mean to me and to whisper to you, many times, all that I feel when I am with you. So I will not write of this here beyond saying, in the simplest way, je t’aime.

I know that I hurt you and that no matter how much I apologize, that fact will always exist. I regret
that I answered your honesty and openness by withholding myself, not once but many times, and though I have told you that I am sorry, many times, I say it again here because it is so deeply true. I promise not to speak of this any more because you have asked me to forget it, but I wanted you to have my apology on paper, as a permanent reminder that your sweetness and generosity in forgiving me...sont tout pour moi.

I cannot promise to love you forever, Cosima. That would an unrealistic, meaningless promise. So I will promise instead to love you forever in every moment we are together.

I love you. Tu es la prunelle des mes yeux. Tu es le désir de mon coeur. You are exactly five eyes across."  

Delphine

As she walks away, Delphine looks back at Cosima’s door. There is her letter. And there, propping it up, sits the yellow pitcher, filled with water and the last red zinnias of the season.

Chapter End Notes

_une couleur composée qu'on ne peut pas redissocier_ Literally: "a composite color that can not be dissociated."

_Tu es la prunelle des mes yeux_ Literally: "You are the sloe of my eyes." Essentially: "you are the apple of my eye."

_Tu es la désir de mon coeur._ "You are the desire of my heart."
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Love conquers all.

Chapter Notes

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I

They are tearing down the Metcalf Shoe Factory and putting in storage units across from Delphine’s loft. She stands at her window and watches as a crane is driven into place and anchored in preparation for the destruction. The previous day she had taken photos of the sign and now she sighs a little as she says goodbye. Delphine has looked at the Metcalf façade almost every day she has lived in her loft and she grieves its loss. She will miss the old-fashioned lettering and the dusty, aging bricks. She will miss the sun crawling down its powdery face, as humble and familiar as air. Adieu, she thinks, forming a picture of blue-gray, Venetian red, and school bus yellow as the crane begins to chime in preparation for the first blow.

Delphine looks away in time to miss the crack as the crane swings around and bricks cascade into the valley between the buildings. In a few moments the sign and the windows and the corbels will be gone, unceremoniously bashed into rubble with no care for their history. Eventually there will be a hole in the ground, and then a soulless modern building built of steel and concrete. In her mind’s eye, however, the Metcalf will remain as it always was. It will retain its right angles, fading colors, and traditional proportions. It will retain its dignity in Delphine’s memory in a composition she will look at often. It is the memory of companionship across an alley. It is the comfort of the past. It is the face of an elderly gentlewoman whom she will always love. The Metcalf will live inside Delphine to be remembered through her paintbrush, each stroke of the bristles and each layer of color as she paints it a reminder of affection, of transience, and of permanence too.

II

There’s been no word on the cathedral design and Delphine decides to complete other work that she has left unfinished. She is still teaching but has sold only three paintings in the last two months and needs to create new pieces or finish as many old ones as she can so that she can shop her work around for another show. Perhaps it is time, she thinks, to deal with the multitude of Isabelle portraits that have been leaning against the walls of her studio, paint side away, for almost a year. Perhaps it is time to look at them as art instead of therapy and to see if she had created anything worthwhile when
Cosima is studying in the other room when Delphine finally faces this demon. One by one she flips the portraits around, spreading them out so that she can confront them. There on canvas stand her feelings about Isabelle. The beautiful breasts, the intense eyes, the provocative positioning of legs and hands: the paintings stab at her even as she acknowledges that many of them are good. She is moved by them, seeing more than technique; they are a pane through which she can view the past. She can read everything in the paint. She sees herself helpless and unhappy, heartbroken by a woman who wasn’t unkind but only honest, and she sees her proximity to hopelessness, forged when she was laid low by grief. Here, in blue and green and orange is her devastated heart and it frightens her.

Delphine begins to breathe through her mouth, trying not to cry. Her emotions have opened like a sluice, rushing to overtake each other and escape her. She no longer wants Isabelle or misses her, but there is sense memory in the paintings that evokes something; she feels vulnerable seeing herself on her canvases in this way. It’s a reminder that she cannot create art without unveiling herself. Usually she controls how and how much of herself she reveals, but these portraits of Isabelle leave nothing uncovered. She feels exposed.

Cosima pads in and wraps her arms around Delphine from the back. “Are you OK?” she asks.

Delphine nods but then turns in Cosima’s arms, holding her tightly and kissing her temple.

“Do you want to turn them back around?”

Delphine inhales Cosima’s scent and says, “No. It just stirred up a lot of feelings to see these again. I’m fine.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Does she want to talk about what she is feeling? Can she even define it? Would it hurt Cosima to know what seeing Isabelle has pulled from her?

She squeezes Cosima and then pulls away to turn around. “I didn’t think I would have this sort of reaction to seeing these after all this time,” she says.

“Do you mean you didn’t think you’d have a strong reaction or that you didn’t think you’d feel what you are feeling?”

“The second. I’ve been ignoring this work because I thought I was done with it, with her.” She scans the array. “I didn’t think I’d feel this.”

She walks to a portrait of Isabelle reclined with spread legs and picks it up. “The thing is…just look at this. It’s so revealing.”

Cosima seems a bit puzzled. “It’s no more erotic than your other work. You paint figures all the time.”

“No, I mean that I see so much of me here. It’s hard to look at myself like this, to see what I felt. I feel more naked than Isabelle.”

“Is that a bad thing?” asks Cosima. “I mean, aren’t you always sort of bared when you paint?”

“These are different, Cosima. I didn’t paint these as art. They came from another place.”
She sets down the painting and picks up another, a portrait of Isabelle’s face. She stands looking at it for a long moment and then sets it down.

“These paintings are beautiful,” says Cosima, “but if you can’t deal with them just put them away or paint over them. There’s no dishonor in leaving these behind. If they are too personal you don’t have to share them.”

“I know. But I feel like I should get something out of all I went through. I want to sell them.”

Cosima steps to the paintings to get a better look. “I don’t think I’ve seen this level of passion in your other work, you know? It’s mind-blowing really, what you’ve created here. It sort of feels like Ginsberg.” Cosima turns to look at her. “You loved her when you painted these. You can see it.”

“Yes,” she affirms.

Delphine looks at Isabelle’s blue-eyed intensity, remembering exactly the willful ease with which she had walked away from their affair. She reaches for Cosima’s hand, wanting to hold on and to move on.

“I think you still love her,” says Cosima, squeezing.

Delphine is surprised, affronted maybe.

“Why would you say that?” She pulls back her hand. “I don’t love her. I hate her a little.”

“It’s not a criticism, babe. I’m not jealous.” She touches Delphine’s arm. “But I don’t think you’re completely over her. She changed you. She changed your art. And you wouldn’t have waited a year to address these paintings if you didn’t still feel something.”

She catches Delphine’s eyes. “You can love her and me too, you know.”

“I don’t want to. I don’t want her to touch what we have. I’ve let that happen too much already. I’ve hurt you by doing that.”

“You need to let that go, Delphine. I’m totally over it and you need to be too.”

Delphine bites her lip and looks down. “I know.”

“Look,” says Cosima. “I know you’ve had a shitty year and that you want to move on. I get it. It’s just…I don’t think that our lives are linear. I don’t think that life is a road that we follow from one point to another and that we can walk away from what is behind us. I think life’s more like….”

Cosima pauses and Delphine looks at her pretty, much-loved face. The beautiful eyes and expressive mouth hold an expression of sincerity and tenderness.

“It’s like picking apples, you know? You walk up and down the rows of trees carrying a bag and you pick. And some experiences go into the bag and some fall to the ground. As you gather, your bag gets filled and you get covered in sweat and dirt. You always carry your bag with you and your clothes never get clean. At the end, your bag is full of your life and you are filthy. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“Sort of,” Delphine says.

Cosima looks away, obviously searching for words. “It’s like this,” she says, her face alive with her desire for Delphine to understand her. “You are more than one woman, Delphine. You are the artist who defied her father so she could paint. You’re the lonely child who pined for her mother at
boarding school. You’re the teenager who fell in love with a beautiful girl and discovered sex.” She smiles at this and Delphine smiles too. “You’re my happy friend, singing and playing guitar at a pig roast.”

She takes Delphine’s hand again. “You’re the woman who loves me, Delphine. And you’re the woman who loves Isabelle and also hates her. You will always be all of these people. And because I love you, I love all of you.”

She raises their joined hands and kisses the back of Delphine’s hand. “What we have isn’t dirtied because of Isabelle. She’s just an apple in your bag. I’m going to help you carry the bag. That’s all it means.”

When Cosima embraces her, Delphine begins to cry a little. But they are good tears, cathartic tears. And they are followed by a teary smile and by relief. Isabelle hasn’t merely floated away. Her memory has finally lost its sting. Cosima has replaced her and Delphine is free.

III

Delphine had mostly forgotten about the print of Cosima and herself they’d made months before and is surprised when Cosima presents it to her for her birthday, just hours before the guests are scheduled to arrive at the loft for a party. It’s been pulled tight over a stretcher frame and when Delphine examines it, she sees that Cosima has embellished it. All along the edges of the figures and around the interior voids and shaded areas is tiny handwriting. In both French and English, Cosima has copied poetry, quotations, and personal notes onto their bodies. From Neruda, Joyce, Browning, Nin, and many others, she has chosen words that that she finds meaningful and moving. Her composition is a beautiful mingling of their two worlds and Delphine loves it.

She is lucky to have found someone like Cosima, Delphine thinks, someone passionate about the arts. Cosima lives for her books and Delphine delights in their shared desire to inhabit the creative world. She feels this inclination as affinity, as an attachment beyond the traditional emotional and physical ties they would still have formed had they been slightly different people. It is another way to communicate, something distinct from touching and speaking. It is an expression of equivalence and to voice it they leave each other tokens like unexplained snippets of language, copies of images, quotations, books left open on the kitchen table to something interesting, doodles, sketches, poems, and uncommon words. Delphine also finds herself trying to describe to Cosima what she experiences while painting or reading, wanting to strengthen the links that connect them, wanting Cosima to enter her interior life.

When Delphine thinks of Cosima, she imagines all of the pieces of their relationship as a synergy, like Ben-Day dots that form a rich picture when viewed in perspective. Love for art and for each other, kindness, humor, willingness to support and to give space, all the little constituents of who they are together touch across space. Unlike her relationship with Isabelle, which was a line, her relationship with Cosima feels like a net, flexible and strong when cast out or pulled back. She is supported by it, and fed.

IV

Shortly before the party is to begin, Cosima takes Delphine’s truck and goes to pick up Scott. Delphine’s painting students --- Joanne and Aki --- and Sarah, Alison, and Ira are already at the loft. Cosima’s parents are on their way. “It’ll be fun,” Cosima had pronounced when Delphine had
groaned at the idea of a birthday party. “People care about you and want to celebrate with you.”

As her love affair with Cosima has progressed, Delphine has become less solitary and has formed relationships, among others, with Cosima’s friends and parents. Scott and Ira are best-loved but she also favors Alison, whose earnestness she recognizes in herself. And she genuinely likes Cosima’s parents, who share the same intelligent and generous nature as her lover. It feels good to have friends and she spends time with some of them without Cosima, making these relationships her own. She also begins to reenter the social world of the art community, taking Cosima with her to gallery openings and other events, conscious that Cosima, who is a total extrovert, thrives on interaction with people whom she finds interesting and bright. Delphine still spends the majority of time alone in her studio, but now it is not an unhealthy solitude. Cosima has brought her back into the world.

The party is a casual thing, everyone bringing something to eat and drink, and they listen to music and talk and argue in a good-natured way about various topics of interest. Cosima sits with her arm around Delphine’s shoulder and Joanne and Aki tease them about marrying. Ira and Scott, who no longer gape at Delphine but have relaxed into their normal bashful selves, discuss their upcoming qualifying exams and bemoan their inability to remember endless quotations and citations as Cosima is able to do. Alison offers practical suggestions about study methods and Sarah finally loses her patience and asks if they can please not talk shop for once.

Delphine leans against Cosima as their friends converse and poke fun and doesn’t think about anything but her happiness. Lamplight reflects off the windows, there are beer bottles scattered on her table, and she does not disappear into her head but projects her energy outward, into the gathering. She glances across the room to where Cosima’s gift sits, waiting to be hung, and feels the happiness of being whole. She is herself again, finally, as Cosima is herself, always. But she doesn’t think about that. She only feels it, bubbling in her spontaneous laughter and in the warmth of the flesh pressed against her shoulder.

The painting is colorful, an experiment, as before, in depicting flesh in colors other than flesh. But this portrait is different because it is of Cosima, who poses seated on a velvet-draped chair with her elbows on her knees; its expression of love is unanguished. Cosima is a pleasure to paint, her body both muscular and soft, and as Delphine works she is filled with the feeling she sometimes has that to depict something loved is to love it more because she has caressed it with both her eyes and her art. There is truth as always in the construct that she is painting, but it is not a truth beneath the real. It is the reality itself. Through her brush, she and Cosima live together in the paint, Cosima’s likeness and Delphine’s passion for that likeness, accentuated and combined.

After a while it is time to rest and Cosima rises from the chair and walks around to the front of the easel to see what Delphine has created.

“I like it,” she comments, “especially this part.” She points to the place where her pale blue scalp shows through the darker green-blue of her hair, looking for all the world like her though it is in the colors of the sea.

Delphine is pleased and her love wells up. She wraps an arm around Cosima and feeling chilled, slightly pebbled skin, asks if she is cold. She fetches the velvet drape and wraps her in it, pulling her close. They stand for a moment, Delphine rubbing Cosima’s back and arms to warm her. The cloth sliding over Cosima’s body is erotic and Delphine wants to make love to her on the studio floor, lying atop her fully clothed and pressing her paint-spattered clothing against her lover’s smooth brown skin. Her want is palpable.
Delphine knows that Cosima is seduced by vocabulary, finding the combination of Delphine’s accent and her lexicon irresistible. “Perspication,” she whispers into Cosima’s hair with a throaty chuckle, as she continues to rub the cloth against her. “Euphoria. Uxorious.”

Cosima laughs and leans closer, burying her face in Delphine’s throat. “Are you trying to tempt me into bed, because it’s totally going to work.”

“Anathema. Diphthong.”

Cosima chuckles again. “You know I love it when you fondle my mother tongue.”


“No way you know that word. You looked that up,” teases Cosima, pulling back from the waist to look into Delphine’s eyes. “What does that even mean?”

Delphine opens the drape and sliding her arms around Cosima’s bare torso, pulls Cosima back to her so that they are both wrapped in the burgundy velvet. “Nice ass,” she states. They both burst into laughter.

And then kiss.

“I want to touch you,” Delphine murmurs, running her hands up and down Cosima’s back until eventually she reaches down to grasp her buttocks. Cosima spreads her legs slightly and, tilting her head, intensifies the kiss, pressing her breasts against Delphine’s shirtfront.

“Lie down,” Delphine directs. “Here. Let me put this down.” She takes the cloth and lays it, nap side up, on the floor in front of the easel.

Cosima reclines and Delphine drapes herself over her, pressing at the groin and pushing Cosima’s hands over her head. “Chiliad,” she says. “A thousand things. There are a thousand things I love about you.” With this she begins to kiss and breathe into Cosima’s ear, knowing that the goosebumps that arise this time are from arousal and not cold. “You are my beautiful, brilliant girl.”

Delphine is certain that there are a thousand reasons to love Cosima. A thousand kindnesses, a thousand laughs, a thousand kisses. She wants to pour these back into her and to add a thousand more. It is almost painful to love someone this much, she thinks, and as she caresses Cosima she feels the ghosts of the thousand things pop in her chest like sparks. She imagines discharging them, passing them through her fingers and palms into Cosima’s body to excite something there. She images this energy as color and she wants to ignite Cosima with it, inside and out.

She rises onto her knees and reaches behind to take a brush off her easel tray. Grasping it so that the bristles lay flush to her forearm and the shaft is nestled against her forefinger, she looks to Cosima for permission. Then she pulls Cosima’s knee up and enters her. Here, she thinks, is the last piece of herself that she will offer, her most loved and personal thing. Here is her secret self, her spirit, her art, placed in the body of her lover. “I adore you,” she says.

As she moves inside Cosima, Delphine closes her eyes. Immediately her perception changes from cloth and wood and moving flesh to heat and wet, to the slight sucking of Cosima’s body at her fingers as she presses forward and then pulls out. She becomes aware of the slick of her own arousal and of the blooming odor that rises as together they bear down and retreat. From sparks her emotions convert into a sort of pressure and she grunts slightly as she pushes this feeling down and into Cosima. The brush is becoming slippery and despite her increasing excitement she concentrates on not losing her grip, canting her wrist slightly to give herself more control.
Cosima begins to push hard with the foot that is planted on the floor by Delphine’s thigh and Delphine increases the speed of her hand, imagining their lovemaking pouring onto the floor like pools of paint. She tips and flings and splashes her feelings onto the beautiful body under her. Paint gathers beneath Cosima’s shoulders, wicks up her dreads and tinges her scalp. Paint bursts over her chest in a wave and drips onto the floor. Pigment gushes into her body through Delphine’s brush. Cosima moans beneath her, her flesh a portrait in green and orange and blue. When Delphine finally opens her eyes and withdraws her hand, it is done; she has completed the circle. What happens next she cannot know. But she doesn’t care. She is in the moment, she is with Cosima, and her shirtsleeve is covered with paint.

VI

Delphine used to have a lover who liked to make love in front of a mirror. At first she thought that it was the picture of their bodies joined together that provoked this impulse, but she came to realize that it was just that her lover liked to see herself. She told her lover once that she would like to paint her hands blue so that they would be more prominent against her skin, so that she could compose a living picture in which she would stand out in relief from the textures and planes that she could perceive only imperfectly in the reflection. It doesn’t matter how we look, said the lover. But Delphine felt this to be untrue. How it looked was everything.

Delphine’s upcoming exhibition is of her Isabelle portraits. She has only two weeks left to prepare. She’s never created an exhibition like this before, never made such a personal statement, and she’s excited by it. Tonight she is experimenting with the mirrors that will be arranged amidst the work, mirrors of all sizes that will project from the tops of the canvases or be placed at various angles adjacent to or flush with the paintings in order to reflect Isabelle back at herself. She has already cast her hands and painted the castings blue. They will grip the mirrors along the sides or at the tops. She is going to call it (ré)Vision.

She is particularly introspective as she prepares for this show. How strange, she thinks, to have moved forward by circling back; here she is obsessing over Isabelle’s likeness again. This time is different, though. Cosima sleeps in the other room while she works. A few months ago she could never have let these two women touch. Now she has brought Isabelle back into their lives in this most intimate and unabashed way: through her art. And she and Cosima are both good with it.

When she is finished for the night and has gotten into bed, she rises onto her forearm to look at the tableau. It is all so beautiful, she thinks and one last image forms before she closes her eyes. She holds it in her mind so that she’ll remember it in the morning. Shadows; moonlight; sheets casually and beautifully draped; Cosima asleep on her back, hand splayed across her belly, face turned away. The composition is small and intimate and is exactly what she sees. It looks like happiness, safety, and peace. But it doesn’t look like love.

It is love.
Delphine stands on the overhang and looks at the sea. This is a favorite spot, the little protrusion overlooking a patch of sand and tidal pools filled with anemones and tiny starfish. She makes the trip up the coast whenever she can and stops occasionally to sketch. She’s been here many times.

She’s busy now that the Winged Cathedral is well-known; she can’t always get away. Her career is ascending and in addition to painting she’s begun accepting architectural commissions for window designs. Despite being busier she guards her routines, standing at her window every morning as she always has, though she misses the Metcalf building and looks with no affection at the structure that replaced it. She’s bought the loft and it’s mostly unchanged; her studio is still the heart of her creative life. The still-life shelves remain filled with the things she loves and wants to paint, though they are larger now and more burdened.

It’s breezy along the Pacific in the evenings and her blouse flaps against her arms and torso. Her hair whips about her face. She gazes at the horizon and watches as the sun begins to settle for the night. There are little golden cups in the waves, made by light that will soon change to pink and then disappear till the morning. The tidal pools are golden as well and she pushes her hair back so that she can see them properly. The gulls dart in swirling formations, no boats within sight for them to chase, and their unpredictable motion stands counterpoint to the gilded waves and the canvas of deep blue sky.

It is time to go. She calls down to Cosima, who is bent at the waist at the edge of a tidal pool. Cosima looks up and waves, and gathering up her towel, starts toward the stairs. Delphine looks out one last time. The cups have vanished. The waves are darkening. The sky has turned scarlet and the ocean, its lifelong companion, raises its face to be kissed. The place where they touch seems to go on forever.

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