

THE ARNOLFINIS

A Story

By Francine Prose



On the night before the painter came, she dreamed that her husband was a weasel. Not just any weasel but the Weasel King. In the courtyard of their Montauk house, his weasel army, box cutters clutched in their paws, sprawled about, asleep on the ground like the soldiers guarding the tomb of Jesus. Weasel servants in uniform passed silver trays of tea and elaborately iced cakes, while out in the tulip garden, rebel weasels dangled from gallows. Then she was back in their Manhattan apartment,

awake. Or was she? Forty-one stories below, beggar weasels chanted loud enough to be heard, "Sugar and meat and corn and meat."

Their high-pitched keening woke her. Their bedroom was cold, which her husband liked. Their blanket was fur, another of his kinks that she went along with. Fine. But now, when she pulled the covers over her shoulders, she felt as if a weasel was stretched the length of her body, covering her, pressing down on her chest, breathing into her mouth--

She screamed.

"Hush," he said. "Elisabetta."

That was the name of his first wife, his beloved dead wife, the wife who had never once been mentioned after their first date, the get-to-know-you dinner that cemented whatever old-school agreement her husband and father had come to, concerning her future.

"Go back to sleep," she said.

Her husband was rich enough, and thanks to her interest in art history and contemporary art, he should have been (by osmosis) savvy enough to hire an art star, a rising young painter who could be persuaded to do the occasional portrait. Considering what her husband was worth, they could have gotten Jeff Koons.

But when anything touched on family tradition, even the imaginary family tradition of the imaginary family, her husband turned into his imaginary parents, or grandparents, or great-great-grandparents. The ancestors he wished he had, and half-pretended he had.

She had never met his family.

He wanted a portrait from another era: the husband and wife in evening wear and formally posed, the wife in an uncomfortable chair, the husband standing behind her, decorously touching her

shoulder, or the wife standing behind the husband, touching *his* shoulder, against a background of clouds, the whole scene bathed in the pastel gauze of whiteness, cost and privilege. The ether of the one per cent. Proudly unstylish—that was the point, or that was part of the point.

One such portrait of his first wife, the dead wife, hung in a spare bedroom in the city. The first wife had been blond and (in her successor's opinion) a bit horsy, somewhat slow, with innocent blue eyes that gazed trustingly into the future. Obviously she had no ideas how brief that future would be. Dressed in a semi-diaphanous, pale daffodil yellow gown, the first wife, Elisabetta, who was Viennese, looked nothing like her replacement, who felt guilty for thinking that the yellow gown was something she wouldn't be caught dead in.

Physically they were opposites. She was the small and quick and dark. Her husband was a pragmatic man. He knew the odds against finding the same thing twice, just as he knew how common it was to make the same mistake. For a hard-headed businessman, he was surprisingly superstitious, though for all she knew, they all were. That was the sort of thing you couldn't ask the other wives on the museum boards. Will your husband walk under a ladder? Is he afraid of black cats?

The walls of the room where the first wife's portrait hung were upholstered in a dark cerulean blue silk. The painting was theatrically lit, and the room was otherwise empty except for an easy chair facing the portrait—a comfortable chair in which her husband sat to contemplate his loss.

The door to that room was kept locked, though no one kept her out. The servants had the key; all she had to do was ask. She'd been in the room only once, just long enough for the dead wife's face to be imprinted on her memory.

Of course she thought of Bluebeard with all those murdered wives locked away in the castle. But her husband had loved his wife. He hadn't killed her. She'd died in childbirth, and the baby died along with her. It was the sort of thing that never happened any more—certainly not in this city, this

neighborhood, overseen by the celebrity obstetrician in the well-regarded hospital in which her husband and his first wife misguidedly placed their trust.

When her husband said he wanted to commission their portrait, she agreed, on the condition that it wouldn't be done by whoever painted his first wife. At first he looked annoyed, then hurt, then he understood.

No, he said. He would never do that. It would be bad luck.

Given the sort of portrait that her husband had in mind, it made sense that the painter he hired should seem to come from an earlier era. Her husband had heard, from some friends at his club, that the wives all liked this guy's work. Even the wives who collected contemporary art had a soft spot for the painter, who was academically trained, in some Old Country or other, and who painted in the style of the Old Masters or, if the client preferred, like Whistler or Sargent. At first he'd agreed to paint the portraits of wealthy children, but he no longer had to, and he'd stopped.

The painter was even older than her husband. She couldn't tell how old he was, dark purple-tinted glasses hid his eyes. A strange choice for a painter. He must have been used to people wondering about his glasses, because, the first thing he said in his slight unplaceable foreign accent was that he had grown sensitive to light, a tragedy for a painter. He was tiny, elfin. She liked where this was going. Rumpelstilskin was painting their portrait.

The first thing he asked (after a glass of water, please, no ice) was that their heavy drapes be drawn, obscuring their panoramic view of Central Park, which she had secretly hoped might appear in the background, even though she knew that, in the kind of portrait her husband wanted, they could be

anywhere, nowhere, floating in ether. In clouds. Her husband should have hired Tiepolo, if he'd known who Tiepolo was and didn't mind that Tiepolo had been dead for hundreds of years.

She knew better than to tell an artist, even this artist, what to do. He'd already told them he couldn't bear the bright light. The drapes were pulled. Then painter decided that the electric lights were the wrong color.

He said, "I am thinking something more *golden*."

Golden sounded right to her husband.

By the time the painter returned for their second meeting, all the bulbs had been replaced with amber bulbs. In the golden light, she and her husband followed the painter from room to room. Jittery and distracted, he slammed in and out of every room except the locked one in which the dead wife's portrait hung.

At last he reached the wood-paneled library, imported by her husband—mahogany shelf by mahogany shelf, burlled walnut panel by burlled walnut panel—from a defunct gentleman's club in Antwerp.

The painter stood in the doorway.

"Perfect," he said.

Then he turned and left the apartment.

The next time, the painter called in advance to ask if the furniture—the grommet-studded leather couches, the weathered brown club chairs-- could be removed from the library. She asked her assistant to have the furniture, which she'd never liked, put in temporary storage.

The painter arrived with a team of assistants, remarkably handsome young men wheeling in enormous crates. The young men looked at her, and she looked back, a silent conversation about the bargain she'd made, the different prices that she and her husband had paid.

The painter asked what she planned to wear in the portrait, and when she hesitated, he asked if he could see her closet. She was proud of it, brightly lit (no amber bulbs here), color-coded, and meticulously organized, her garments arranged from casual to formal, from often to rarely worn, her purses and shoes in cubicles, all visible at once.

She couldn't tell if the painter was impressed. He walked to the end of the rarely worn—green—section, to the *far* end of the rarely worn green section, and asked if she would mind wearing, in the portrait, the green velvet gown she wore only once, to a Renaissance-themed fundraiser for an organization raising money to help Syrian orphans. Yes, she minded. The high waist made her look eight months pregnant. The neckline made her head look gigantic.

So why did she say yes? Whatever the painter thought best. She said that she was—that she and her husband were—in the painter's hands. Why did she say *that*?

By the time she finished squeezing her arms into the sleeves and fixing her hair and make-up, she returned to the library to find that the painter's assistants had unpacked the crates and arranged some large old-fashioned furniture: a canopied wooden bed covered in scarlet brocade, a round mirror, a wooden chest, a Persian rug. Up on a ladder, a helper was replacing an antique Murano chandelier with a more antique Murano chandelier. Some rewiring was involved, and he kept calling down to one of his co-workers for advice.

Something looked familiar, like one of those period rooms in museums, model rooms you couldn't enter, which she'd stared at, from behind a rope, wishing she lived there. Now, it seemed, she did live there, at least she was having her portrait painted in a room like that

Her husband appeared in the doorway, followed by the painter, who had persuaded her husband to wear the costume from that same Renaissance-themed dinner: a long fur-trimmed black cape over black pants, black shoes. He'd liked wearing the fur that night. Yet now he looked hot, uncomfortable. He kept scratching the back of his neck.

When she saw him, she smiled so brightly that his expression softened. He seemed almost bashful, a lucky boy basking in mom's adoration. A rich lucky middle-aged boy.

"You look amazing," he said.

"So do you," she said.

Let him think what he wanted. That wasn't why she was smiling.

She finally knew what the painter was doing. Why had it taken so long? Her life must have made her stupid, or anyway, slow to catch on.

The painter was having them reenact Jan Eyck's 15th century double portrait, "The Marriage of Jan Arnolfini." A work of art, known to millions, to everyone except, apparently, her husband.

At first she was annoyed. The painter's little *project* reminded her of those cut-outs you used to see at state fairs and carnival midways. You stick your face in a face-sized hole in a sheet of painted wood or cardboard. The photographer takes a picture, and poof, you're wearing Lady Liberty's crown. Or there you are: a bride, a pirate, a mermaid with a goofy grim to camouflage the shame.

It was as if two holes had been cut out in Van Eyck's portrait, and she and her husband were poking their heads through. It was tacky, demeaning—and extremely expensive. But after a while it occurred to her that it might be like—well, *sort of* like—one of Cindy Sherman's wildly expensive self portraits as a character in an Old Master painting.

It might be a cool, or a little bit cool, and frankly she was surprised that this ancient painter in purple aviator shades would think of something so postmodern.

As far as she knew her husband had never been to a museum, not counting school trips. He refused to go to museums with her, though he wrote the checks that allowed her to sit on museum boards, and he was there by her side, properly dressed, at dinners intended to persuade him to write bigger checks. If the dinner was *in* a museum, he walked by the Egyptian tomb artifacts and Cezannes as if they were tiles or bricks: parts of the wall.

He didn't see the *point* of art except for family portraits. In his opinion, the painting of his dead wife was more important than the Mona Lisa.

Dressing like the court jester was definitely not his style. But because his wife seemed entertained and ready (later, after drinks) for sex, he played along. It became a little joke, between the husband and his wife, and another kind of little joke between the wife and the painter.

She wanted the painting to exist, which is why she didn't tell her husband what the artist was doing. Some people might think it was sort of funny. And not in a good way. Her husband would hate to be laughed at,

She decided not to warn him.

Luckily, the painter worked quickly, looking, sketching, looking, sketching. It must have been hard for him too, standing in the heat (no air-conditioner, the painter insisted) in his heavy shapeless clothes that seemed to have been made out of blankets. Her husband assumed that they'd be sitting, but the painter asked them to stand, half facing each other, half facing him. She wondered what he saw. She only hoped he didn't see the tyrant weasel in her dream.

When the painter asked if they could hold hands, her hand shook so much that her husband had to hold it still, and the painter saw that too. Her skin, her husband's skin. Would he paint them the same, like the soft dewy hands of Jan Arnolfini and his bride?

The painter asked her husband to turn his palm up, to cradle her hand, also palm up, as if they were receiving blessings like holy water raining from the ceiling.

“And now, please,” said the painter. “Can Madam look down at her shoes?”

She couldn’t remember what shoes she was wearing. Oh, right. The unflattering slippers. Well, if she was going to stand. The toes were a little too pointy.

The painter asked her husband to remove his shoes, and her husband agreed.

Her husband was twice her age. He was a widower. He was rich. He was a friend (well, really, a business associate) of her diplomat father’s. She was American but she had grown up in other countries, on other continents. She was eighteen when she got it into her head that she was American and agreed to come to New York and marry him, if she liked him.

She had fallen in love with the wrong young man, the boy she would love forever. Her husband would never find out.

Maybe this was what the painter saw, or what the painter knew: that their marriage dated from another century. Her mother had warned her from childhood. Her father would insist on her marrying someone “in finance.” The only hope would have been if she’d been ugly, but she was pretty and doomed.

She missed her younger siblings. Her baby brother used to cling to her chest like a monkey. What cruelty on her father and her husband’s part had (in the pre-nup) prohibited her from seeing her siblings until they came of age? What had she done to deserve that? What did they fear that her siblings would persuade her to do, or vice versa?

Sometimes she wept when the painter was working. Neither he nor her husband asked what was wrong. She couldn’t have explained. She only hoped that the painter wouldn’t include her runny mascara.

The painter did none of the actual painting in their apartment. He sketched and rearranged the props and sketched some more. She knew what he was looking for, because at night, while her husband slept, she studied a reproduction of the Van Eyck painting.

She bought a book about the painting and hid it from her husband. One essay said that the image was a formal document sealing the marriage of the wealthy Italian merchant and his wife. In a less popular interpretation, the bride is already very pregnant and the husband is trying to read the future of their unborn child in his wife's palm. But he isn't looking at her palm, so how would that have worked?

When the painter was there she tried to assume the modest, pigeon-toed stance, the demure expression, the downcast eyes, she tried to look like the young wife of Jan—Giovanni—Arnolfini. The painting her husband wanted was neither a document nor a divination of a child's future.

They would never have a child. That was part of the bargain, which was fine with her. The first wife's death had made the rules. Her husband wasn't going to risk it, even though he claimed to believe that lightning didn't strike twice.

Sometimes she wished he would hurry up and die, so she might still have a real life—a family life—with someone else. A life with one of the young men who'd wheeled the heavy furniture into the library. She felt awful when she thought these things, and she tried not to think them.

The book about the painting said that, under Germanic tribal law, a wife who left her husband could be condemned to be buried alive in horse dung.

Much of the painter's time with them was spent showing her husband how to hold up his right hand as if he was giving a benediction or taking an oath. The gestures was unnatural to him, and he looked silly, trying. The painter lit a candle—and blew it out. He lit it and blew it out again. Each time the flame was extinguished, she began to weep.

On the last day he came to their apartment—after that he would be working in his studio—he asked her if there was anything she would like to see in the painting, an object with personal significance that she would like to include.

She looked at the painter, and though his eyes were hidden behind the glasses, she could tell that he understood that she knew what he was doing. Without looking at her husband, she could see the look of surprised irritation (or irritated surprise) on her his face. Until now she had not been consulted.

“My dog,” she said. “Can we put my dog in the painting?”

Her Pomeranian’s name was Twitchy: no explanation needed. She wanted him in the painting because he was only creature she loved, but also because there was a dog who looked very much like Twitchy in the Arnolfini portrait.

Maybe that was where the painter had gotten the idea to paint them that way. He had quite taken with twitch during his very first visit.

The painter would let her include her dog. In fact, he *wanted* her dog in the painting, as long as it was small and cute and intelligent-looking, like the dog in the Van Eyck.

“An unusual request,” her husband said grimly. There were no pets in the portraits he’d had in mind, just the married couple.

“Not at all,” said the painter. “Many of my clients these days want pets in their portraits. I am happy to oblige. Unfortunately, I am allergic to dogs and cats, so, like the Old Masters, who had assistants chosen to paint details that weren’t their strong suit, I have a man—a dog man—who will come next week. He will complete a sketch of your dog that we will use in your portrait.”

Unusual, but whatever. The painter had his own way of working.

He was an artist. Her husband didn’t think he had to be present for the dog man’s visit.

Perhaps he would have stuck around if he'd known that the dog man would be so much like his name: unshaven, slovenly, overweight, the mournful eyes of a basset hound. He smelled like the vet's office, of disinfectant and terrified pets. When he introduced himself, she didn't catch his name.

Despite *his* name, Twitchy was capable of remaining still for long periods of time—a rare quality, according to the dog man, who while he worked told her long boring stories about chasing a spoiled mutt around a rich person's vast apartment, how he'd wished he'd had a net, like the old-fashioned dog catchers, not that his client would have allowed it. He told her about the Bichon Frisee who ran into his mistress's bedroom, and when he crawled under the client's bed to retrieve it, he emerged to find the client sprawled across the covers, naked. He asked about Twitchy's sex life, was Twitchy fond of licking himself in that special place.

"I don't know," she said. "He's very private."

"For a dog," said the dog man.

"For anyone," she said.

One morning, the painter's assistants came and took away the canopied bed, the wooden chest, the rug, the props.

Her housekeeper called the storage company and had their old furniture moved back in.

Soon everything was as it had been. Or almost.

She was waiting.

Weeks went by. They heard nothing from the painter, and when her husband's secretary called the studio, his assistants said the painter was out of town or conferring with a client. He would call back.

He didn't call back.

“You notice that they never say he’s working,” her husband said.

“I’m sure he’s working,” she said. “That’s what his assistants are trained to say.” But she wasn’t sure. Maybe he’d given up painting them as the Arnolfinis. Maybe it had become to seem stupid. A bad idea. Or...maybe he’d seen something when he’d looked at them that he didn’t want to put on canvas.

She was curious about the painting, but half hoped her husband would forget it. When she thought about the painter, she’d begun to feel a weird mix of embarrassment and dread, as if she’d come up with a stupid idea that might happen.

Months passed. Her husband’s secretary wrote to the painter to inquire about his progress and “suggest” he return the advance if couldn’t deliver. A second letter told the painter to expect to hear from their attorney. There was no reply.

One morning, the painter called to say that the painting was ready.

Would it be convenient for him to bring it over tomorrow evening?

All day long she was as anxious. She changed her outfit ten times. She applied her makeup—too much!—washed her face and began again. She closed the drapes, opened them, closed them and asked the servants to reinstall the amber light bulbs. She ordered cakes from the city’s best bakery, even though the painter had never eaten one bite in their home. She poured sherry in a decanter, then hid the decanter.

When the cakes arrived she realized that they were the cakes that the uniformed weasel servants offered around, in her nightmare. She decided to serve them anyway. No one would know that she’d dreamed about the pastry.

Why was she nervous? She was about to see a painting that she might like or not. Her husband wouldn’t like. The two of them dressed and posed as the Arnolfinis—maybe it would be funny. Maybe

her husband would get the joke. More likely he wouldn't. Maybe he'd ask for his money back. One thing her husband had in common with his friends was that no one ever said no to them.

Her husband didn't like surprises, and he was rich and powerful enough to avoid roughly eighty percent of the unexpected, depending on how you calculated. Being surprised by the painter could play out in several ways, none of them ideal. Fortunately, she was used to cajoling her husband out of his tempers and snits.

Her husband stayed home from work that day. He was uneasy too. Maybe he was afraid that the painting would highlight their age difference, as if she didn't know. It felt as if they were preparing for invasive medical tests. Something on the inside was about to be made visible on the outside. She knew she was overdramatizing. They were going to see a painting! What did it matter, if her husband didn't like it? Art history was littered with portrait subjects who didn't like how they looked in works of genius. Who cared what the Mona Lisa felt, whether those kings had their vanity stroked, or had the painter beheaded. Had her husband's wife liked how *she* looked in the portrait in the spare room?

The painter was the one who should have felt nervous, but from the beginning, it was as if the painter was the employer and they his eager to please employees.

At six precisely, the painter arrived, accompanied by two assistants who carried the painting under a green velvet cloth that could have been cut from the dress she wore in the painting, and suspended from two poles, the way, in medieval illuminations, the hunters hang dead animals. She smiled and told the painter how excited they were, how eager to see what he'd done.

The painter's nearly invisible eyes took in the platter of iced cakes.

“What beautiful cakes. I would have loved them in the painting. But when I realize what I should have done, it’s always too late. Remind me...which painter kept insisting that his subjects give back their portrait so he could work on it more.”

“Dorian Gray,” said her husband. Did he even know who that was?

“Dear,” she said, “That wasn’t the painter, that—“

“I know who the hell Dorian Gray was. So why doesn’t Senor Picasso take the painting back and waste more of our time so he can add in the pastry?”

“Darling!” she said. “That was harsh. Aren’t you being a little...?”

Her husband glared at her.

The painter asked his assistant to place the painting, still covered, on the easel they’d set up.

She glanced at her husband. The painting was smaller than he’d imagined. How big was the Arnolfini portrait? She didn’t know. Masterpieces were always smaller than you thought, like movie stars when you see them in real life.

“Please,” said the painter.

His assistant gently pulled off the velvet cloth.

It was the Arnolfini portrait. The room, the mirror, the wooden chest, the patterned rug, the red-canopied bed. There was Twitchy, his image not only lifelike but conveying his bright spirit, his intelligence, his spitty desire to please. She took back every negative thought she’d had about the dog man, and stared raptly at her dog, so alive she could almost see his little heart thumping beneath his fur the way it did at meal times or when the prettiest dog walker came.

She’d look at the couple last.

Just then she heard a peculiar sound coming from her husband, and she turned to see he was snorting back tears.

Only then did she look at the couple, their hands joined, their husband in stocking feet...For a moment she was distracted by a keening that turned into the singing of the weasel-beggars in her dream. Sugar and meat and corn and meat. Tinnitus, she'd had it before. Ringing in her ears. There was nothing her doctor could do. Sometimes stress brought it on. It always disappeared on its own.

Her husband was crying.

The wife's face wasn't her face. The wife in the painting wasn't her.

Blond, blue-eyed, malleable, trusting—it was the face of her husband's dead wife.

"You'll be hearing from my lawyer," said her husband, slamming the door on his way out. She was embarrassed because her husband's exit line was such a cliché.

After a while she asked the painter, "How did you do it? Did you find her photo on the internet and read about her...and do this...as some kind of joke? Or what?" He would never tell her. It was like asking Houdini how he escaped underwater.

"I don't use the internet," the painter said. "And what would the joke be?"

"Your painting her face instead of mine."

"Whose face?"

"The woman in the painting is my husband's first wife. His dead first wife."

"Ah ha. I see," said the painter. "I was wondering whose face it was. I knew it wasn't your face, but every time...I was worried about it, and I was right to be."

"Her name was Elisabetta. She was Viennese. You painted a dead woman instead of me." Did she sound angry? She wasn't. Maybe that would come later, like the pain when you stub your toe. "But you knew that, right?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I promise you, I didn't. I would never."

The painter took off his glasses. He squinted in the amber light. The whites of his eyes were a shocking pink—not exhausted pink, or blood-shot pink. A pink that made her imagine his blood coursing from his hands to his eyes to his brain. Her husband had hired the devil to paint their family portrait.

“Why?” she said. “Why would you *do* that?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to explain. It painted itself. It’s a...*sensation* I’ve experienced. Of something—a painting I’m working on--having a will of its own. Telling me what to paint next. But this time was different.”

“Different how?”

“In the past I was actually painting. To say that the painting painted itself was a figure of speech. But with this painting, I’d go to my studio in the morning and find that someone or something had worked on it during the night, when the studio was empty. It was further along than I’d left it. That too is a common story, believe it or not, but it’s never happened to me.”

Her husband did in fact talk to his lawyer, who explained why it would be hard to win the case. It wasn’t textbook breach of contract, plus no contract was ever signed. It was assumed that a portrait would look like the sitters, but Picasso had changed that. It hadn’t meant that for ages.

Her husband paid for the painting, which went up in the spare room across from the formal portrait of Elisabetta.

She never went in there, nor did she care if her husband did.

After her husband's death she didn't know what to do with the two paintings. It seemed sinful to throw them out. Then she got the idea of sending both canvases to his first wife's family in Vienna. She hired a graduate student to do an internet search, and reliable art handlers to arrange the shipping.

A few weeks later she got an email dictated, thanks to a dear grandniece, by Elisabetta's ancient mother. The old woman thanked her and said how deeply she was touched by the two paintings of her daughter, two works of art that, she felt, had been painted just for her.

It was quite a long email. She explained that she had almost forgotten what her daughter looked like. The few photos she'd stared at for so long had lost the power to bring Elisabetta back. But when she saw the painting of her daughter *injected* (her second husband had been a physician) into the Van Eyck double portrait, her daughter's favorite painting, an image she'd had in reproduction, on her bedroom wall, ever since she was a little girl, the mother that her daughter had returned to her, returned to her forever.

When the old woman looked at the painting, she heard the voice of her daughter, as a child, saying how much she wanted a dog like the little dog in the painting.