

From Chapter 6, 'A Day Like Any Other':

"Most people think of this as real connoisseurs' stuff," she said. "For art historians. Why do you like them so much?"

"I like the collective, impersonal faith that's there," he said slowly, after a moment, realizing he was being drawn out. "Later on, that gets marginalized by individuality."

"I wouldn't have thought of you as particularly religious."

"I don't know whether I am or not," he answered, after another moment. "I am a believer in the commonplace mysteries of the world. Theistic, of course: if there were no God, pi would be a rational number. But not this –" he gestured towards the Christ in front of them – "not any longer. I genuinely wish I could believe. It was fine in its day, but the day is done. It's too solar now."

"But that doesn't mean the commonplace mysteries are dead or the pure faith that's in those paintings," he went on, just a bit hesitantly. There was a shyness in his manner that was completely charming. "That's always the same, whether it's at Babylon, Peking, Rome, or –" he rolled his head upward – "Alpha Centauri. It's only that particular iconography that's finished. Someone's going to find the symbols to replace the Sun-God with the Star-Scatterer, maybe in our lifetimes, certainly in your children's. The great beast is slouching forward again. Some people have been hearing its footsteps for a century now. Pretty soon, you're going to have to be deaf not to."

They moved down the hall. She touched his shoulder softly. She was having a terrible time keeping her hands to herself.

"Commonplace mysteries? You mean Mandlebrot sets and strange attractors? Things like that?" Adele asked, straining her memory.

"No. That's wonderful work – work of genius. But not at all mysterious or counterintuitive. Confirming intuition, in fact. I mean the mysteries you encounter everyday."

"Maybe the computers will resolve that, too," she said, prompting again.

"Not the fundamental stuff," he said more firmly, now definitely opening up. "They've only made the dark glass darker. Sixty years ago, it was plausible to wonder if all the real questions were all only language on holiday. Now the babies on the island are all around, Turing machines, pure tabulae rasae, the experiment everyone always wanted to do, happening everywhere. They think, but they don't know they are. They speak a fine, serviceable language with none of these confusions. That's the language that should have evolved if all there was was blind matter and howling force. Only it didn't, that's the major problem, that's the most commonplace wonder of them all. The flesh of the language turns out to be so much different than the skeleton it hangs on. The existence of the question is proof of the answer."

And now he was voyaging alone through seas of thought too strange for her to want to follow. An image of herself calling to him from the shore flickered through her mind as she spoke.

"Just what are these fundamental mysteries?" she said.

He shrugged, and spoke now without any hesitation: "What you'd think. What human beings are, why they are. Why intelligence is. Time – always changing, but always now. Self distinct from identity – somehow you know you'd still be you, even if you were someone else. You know some things are right, and some are wrong; it doesn't matter whether they're useful to you or not, and you know that, but you don't know why. Dreams about the measureless when everything you experience is measurable – infinity arising out of finitude. Quantity and quality, wholes and sums, that they correlate randomly, we talked about that. That such things can be, black holes in rationality itself, mirrors of the ones in the sky."

"Oh," she said airily, "those mysteries," waving her hand dismissively, her green eyes flashing so he'd know he'd been set up, and was rewarded with the half-smile and brightening glance that were his substitute for laughter. He put his hand on her back and they took a few more steps.

"Cynic," he murmured.

"It serves you right for that trick in the cafeteria," she said, poker-faced, without looking back. "And you were too talking about that vase yesterday. Hell hath no fury like a woman scammed." He half-closed his eyes in reproach.

"Anyway, you sound more like a philosopher than a poet," she went on.

He shrugged. "One coin, two sides," then stopped abruptly.

He stood, transfixed, in front of a glass case that housed a small oil-on-wood painting.

It was the famous Gothic depiction of the Last Judgment, painted by one of the Van Eycks in the mid-fifteenth century. In the top half, the saints are assembled in heaven, a literal heavenly choir, painted in the colors of the first morning of creation. At the bottom, the sinners are driven into hell, cast down by a blond cherubim – a child – with a sword, the damned writhing in torment, their bodies twisting unnaturally in their agony, fear and despair in their faces, some half devoured by toothy, bestial demons.

It was the bottom half of the picture that had absorbed him.

"Yes," he said, mostly to himself, "I forgot that one. Too good a day. The soul; salvation and damnation. Predestination; destiny. Not literally like that, of course, but still. . ." His voice trailed off. He had the same dead, faraway expression that she had seen twice the other day. She hated that look. All the joy of the afternoon disappeared in an instant.

She touched his sleeve; she wanted to get away from there, quickly. "Tom, please. I'd like to show you my favorite things here. And then if we could go through the Prado show again? Please? Tom? Tom, listen to me."

He gazed at the damned for an instant longer, then tore his eyes away, was back with her again, to her considerable relief. "Sure."

He turned back at the Van Eyck a last time. "You look like that angel, except for the blond hair."

"So does every other woman in the building." She looked at the picture herself, shuddered, and went on without thinking. "I'd never be that kind of angel. I'd be the kind that he didn't paint, that looks after little children."

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"These are your favorites?" They were standing in front of *The Triumph of Marius*, one of three huge panels by Tiepolo of scenes of ancient Rome.

"Yes. The reasons are personal. It's not the art as such." She paused. "My mother painted like that, the same balance, the same – I don't know – brightness. She was every bit that good." She paused again, and then looked up at him. "You're the first person in my whole life I told that to," she said quietly. "Not even my own family." Not her father, not her brothers; she was the legatee of that gift, no one else. And now she had confided a sense of it to a comparative stranger. The extraordinary intimacy she'd developed with this man, so quickly! Exhilarating and frightening.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Why not any others?"

She shrugged. "Afraid I'd be committed to the loony bin, I guess, or that someone would laugh." She turned and looked up at him again. "But it's true."

"Why isn't she here?" He was not challenging, simply asking.

"She lived on too small a scale, horizons too narrow. She had quite a local reputation; she still does, I suppose, but it didn't travel. Maybe there's a little sexism. At any rate, it didn't happen. Not that that's all bad. She was a happy woman, probably a lot happier than most of the artists who are here."

"A desert rose. Tell me about her," he said quietly, and Adele did – the art shows, the excitement, the long, lovely Saturday afternoons they had shared when she was a child. He listened until it was apparent that she was about to make herself unhappy, then stopped her with the lightest touch of her shoulder.

"Let's go back through the Prado now."