

1818

Theodore balked at the stench. Paris had taught him to turn his nose, to shut out the rotten food waste and faecal debris that even the water that sluiced down the cobbled gullies to the Seine couldn't flush away.

He shouldered his sketch book; full of the colour and texture of flesh of the deceased. With the barest of nods to the undertaker who unceremoniously slid the cadaver home and then slammed the door to the morgue cold store shut.

He needed a drink. So without ado, he transported himself to his next appointment coincidentally at the Bar Henri. Two canvasses one brush.

In front of him on the rickety table propped up with a bar mat, stood a curvaceous absinth glass. Theodore placed a slotted spoon over the rim and dropped a sugar cube into place. He then took a jug of iced water and poured it all over. The cube crumbled and dissolved, trickling down into the body of the glass to form an opalescent pool, la louche, bloomed and anis and fennel struck his nostrils.

His informant, nodded to him and sat at the table. The ex-matelot called for a more brutal Caribbean rum, which the barmaid thumped onto the table with a positive disdain. 'Pah artists!'

Several intoxicated hours later and Theodore had returned to his studio. He carefully placed his notes and sketches next to the scale model so delicately crafted by a shipwright imported from the coast for that exact purpose. The sea and sky studies painted at Le Havre; the still life of the severed head 'borrowed' from the lunatic asylum stood on easels; as still as a mouse. He contemplated the room. all now was ready. He could begin his opus.

1990

'Come on. we don't have to queue. I have a cunning plan.'

'Why do we have to do the Louvre? I told you I'd rather do the Musee d'Orsay.'

'Look buster we are on honeymoon and it is what I need to see for my dissertation.'

'Exactly... we are on honeymoon and this is such a tourist thing to do!'

'You know that I need to see this particular painting.'

'More than that inconsequential waif? Or the Venus de Milo?'

Julliane, pumped the automatic ticket booth full of Franc coins till it spat out two billets. She handed one to her new husband Mark, that rolled off the tongue rather well. New husband.

They leapfrogged the queue and charged down the escalator into the depths, beneath the huge glass pyramid. The Three Graces shot past, as they rushed, quickly coming face to face with the inconsequential waif.

'She does have an enigmatic smile but she's sooo small.'

'So, lets go see something worth seeing.'

'Look behind you.'

Mark turned and gasped at the sixteen-foot by twenty-three-foot monstrosity.

'The raft of the Medusa. Theodore Gericault.'

A captain's incompetence, starvation, thirst and pleading to the Brig Argus a dot in the distance filled the whole wall.

'Wow. Now that's a painting.'