

## Eduard's Eyes

August always said of Eduard that he stood only halfway in this world. His mind was ever elsewhere – not scattered or excitable, but secret, deeply ruminating, in a place you could not find him. Then he would look at you and smile and it was like the lens of a telescope clicking into place and there he was, tall, sweet, brilliant Eduard, back on earth, ready to breathe and talk and open his soul to you – share where he had been, what he had discovered.

August was not like that. August could hardly sit still, needed noise and music and company. In the mornings he would go to the “Cortisches Kaffeehaus” in the Volksgarten, the best coffee shop, he declared, in Vienna, and only then begin to feel awake and alive, in the tumult and the smells and the company, with more food and drink than he deserved, wanting to fatten himself, body and mind, on all of it. Then he could begin his work. But Eduard, tall, fragile Eduard, seemed always most in danger of getting thinner. Which was not to say he had no joy – it was simply a quiet joy.

Each young man had been afraid the other would not like him. They had met at the Polytechnical Institute in 1833. They had sat across from each other in their figure-modeling class, drawing a naked girl. August was square and strong and wore a scarf around his neck. He noticed himself glancing at Eduard more than he glanced at the girl. The girl was reclining with her soft arm along her

side. She was perfectly still. But Eduard seemed even stiller. He struck August as a tall, transparent pillar of stillness, as if a ray of sunlight had been crystalized in the air. Only his eyes moved, and his long, precise, elegant hands – but so deliberately and smoothly that they hardly seemed to move at all. And somehow August found himself sketching, with a bit of pastel, Eduard's eyes, Eduard's brows, in the corner of the paper which also held the sketch of the naked girl. But he could not capture Eduard's eyes. Nor Eduard's hands. Those were the most telling parts of a man, and the hardest to draw.

Then Eduard caught August looking at him, and August blushed and rubbed the sketch out with the side of his hand – as if Eduard had been able to see through the paper.

It was for Eduard's sake that August studied architecture – so that he could be near Eduard, though still they had scarcely exchanged a word. This of course was the behavior of a man deluded, but it turned out after all that he was good at architecture, and liked it, and was popular with everyone and got good marks. He applied himself diligently to his studies, because architecture was the key to Eduard. Eduard had wanted to create buildings since he was a tiny boy, when he had built cities out of mud.

One morning August woke early, with a restlessness in his heart, almost a kind of pain, and it seemed he felt the earth tilting beneath him, shaking and tipping dangerously, as if he would fall off the edge of it, and he felt suddenly hot and full of panic, and dressed and bolted from his

apartment as if there were a murderer at his heels. He would have gone to the coffee shop but it was too early, dawn was just breaking, so instead he went to the drafting studio where he had left a drawing for a new bank building. He thought perhaps his panic was about work, even though really it was about death, about how time was passing and he had no one to love and someday he would die. But he made himself believe it was work.

He turned the key to the studio and opened the door and there, in the purplish morning, the cool astonished light of another breaking day, curled on a bench in his shirtsleeves, his coat loose over his shoulders, his head cradled on his long slender arm, was the sleeping figure of Eduard.

He should have sketched him but there was no chance. All the rest of his life August berated himself for being so loud, so clumsy, so unaware, so bereft of stillness that his crashing entrance into the pearly light of surprised dawn woke Eduard in an instant, woke him before charcoal or pencil could capture him dreaming and in peace.

Eduard's eyes opened and focused slowly on the panting figure of August. He sat up, letting the coat drop to his lap, and gave a sweet, rueful smile. "You found me out," he said.

August felt his heart hammering in his breast. It was so quiet here. He supposed he must prefer noisy places because then he could be in no danger of waking the drowsy sunbeams; never risk hearing the hammering of his own heart.

It hammered now with fear and joy, helpless and unbridled. “I’m so sorry,” he said in a cracking voice, a voice rough with morning and with his helpless emotion. “I didn’t know anyone was here.”

“I must have fallen asleep,” Eduard observed. He regarded August gently.

For a moment it seemed they were both petrified to the spot. Except, of course, for August’s heart. August thought his heart might kill him. The room warmed slowly with the rising sun. It was August’s turn to say something, and he always had something to say. But he could not think above the frantic calling of his heart.

Still smiling gently, Eduard tilted his head, as if listening to an interesting question. Then he reached out his long, graceful hand, bare to the elbow, to August. He held it there, extended, and then he stood. They were perhaps two meters apart. August took a breath and reached out his own hand and with thundering steps strode across the room and then Eduard, with a light laugh, caught August’s hand in his own, and they embraced without words, like ground meeting sky.

That was how they wanted their buildings to be, bridges between heaven and earth. So that a man or woman was always connected to both – always reaching heavenwards but never in danger of tilting off the edge of the world. With Eduard’s invention and August’s energy they were soon the most successful architects in Vienna. Then, many years

after their meeting and the formation of their love and partnership, they received perhaps their greatest commission, one that had the potential to shine the brightest of all their works: to design the new opera house, the central jewel of the new Ringstrasse, a planned series of stately buildings replacing the old city walls, which would encircle Vienna and lend to the city its greatest glory. This opera house, more than anything, would bring heaven to earth – it would be a cathedral to song, to loveliness, to passion and heartache and redemption, would contain within it the most beautiful sounds and the most exquisite silence. It would be an embodiment of both of them, and all their ideals.

But then it all went wrong. It was a great, pressured project. The construction came along slowly, dragged, limped, for years. Six years, seven, then eight. The press, the public, began to ridicule the design, say it was not good enough, was a mishmash of styles; overwrought, melodramatic, unsightly. There were songs written, to mock the design. August found he could no longer visit his favorite coffee shop. Eduard ate too little, from the strain on his nerves, and grew haggard. Then they started getting letters, threatening letters, horrible letters, not just attacking the design of the opera house but attacking *them*, August and Eduard, what they were to each other – calling ugly what was exquisite, perverted what could never be more just. August laughed and blustered scornfully, burned the letters, but Eduard could not laugh, could not smile. He said once, qui-

etly, that the opera house was he himself. August said of course it was; that Eduard was the most beautiful, that he would be filled with music and silence and beauty, just like the opera house would be. But Eduard said that wasn't what he meant.

August found him on the fourth of April, 1868. A year before the opera house was finished, and opened, and filled with music and beauty and glittering ladies with their ribbons and fans. Eduard had hanged himself. August let out a cry. It was as if his heart had burst. He cried out for love, for the shock of it, the shocking loss, the story that had ended wrongly.

Weeks later, sick with grief, August went to his desk and took out a drawing. All these years he had saved it. He had even thought of having it framed. But people would have wondered. It was not a good sketch; the girl was out of proportion and her face smudged darkly, the left leg all mangled. But in the upper right hand corner was the faint outline of the erased eyes of Eduard. And August discovered, now, in his sickness and grief, that he had not been such a terrible artist, after all. He had not failed. He had not needed to blot anything out. He was there, sweet Eduard, come back to earth, to the paper, from wherever it was he had gone.