

MARK W. TIEDEMANN

PSYCHE

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"Not myself," he said, his Dutch accent slowing his words.

"I understand that, Monsieur Van Helsing," Berthe said. "I don't do -- I have never done -- a death mask. It's not something my technique is well suited to --

--

"Yes, yes, I realize that. This new style...I confess I do not care for it myself, but it has certain advantages which I believe will work to my purposes."

Berthe smiled tolerantly and looked out her window. Paris seemed drugged under the searing August sun and the late hour's light layered the city with an amber stickiness that blurred detail and nagged at her to go to her easel and palette.

"Wouldn't a sculptor be better...?"

"No. The subject would not, I think, be served by a too precise rendering." He drew a deep breath and seemed to look inward. His forehead creased thoughtfully.

"There was a fluidity to him in... before."

Berthe flexed her fingers and winced at the slight pain. She rubbed her right hand gently.

"Rheumatism?"

She looked up, startled.

"I am a doctor," he explained, the ghost of a smile twisting the scar. "Is it bad?"

Berthe shrugged. "Painting is sometimes difficult, but usually only in the morning or during winter. It is nothing."

"I could prescribe -- "

"No. No, thank you." She sighed again. "Your offer intrigues me, I admit, but not for the reasons you may think."

"I am prepared to offer a good commission -- "

"Of course, I had no doubt, but -- in truth, monsieur, I would do this for the promise that I am allowed to paint you."

He laughed, a dry exhalation that, for a moment, she thought would degenerate into a ragged cough. For the first time during the interview she saw an

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He laughed, a dry exhalation that, for a moment, she thought would degenerate into a ragged cough. For the first time during the interview she saw an unguarded emotion --surprise, perhaps even disbelief--animate his face.

"You are not serious."

"I am, I assure you." She switched hands and rubbed her left. "One finds that one has painted everything after a time. Even if one has not, it seems so. Ennui is a disease of the inspired."

"Is it?"

"You have never been inspired, monsieur?"

"No. Only obsessed. One does not suffer ennui when one is obsessed." He waved his left hand vaguely around his face. "What is it you see?"

"I don't know. But I am inspired."

"Mmm. I am flattered."

"I haven't painted much in this year. My husband passed away in April --"

"I am sorry."

"--and many of my Mends, as well, have died in the last few years. I feel...short of time."

"I understand that fully. I am myself not young." She nodded. "We both are of an age when it is best to be occupied so that we do not dwell on such things overly much."

"There is, unfortunately, nothing left

for me to dwell on. Only details. Small things that I feel are necessary to complete what is past.”

"Like this death mask?"

"Like the death mask, yes. The subject occupied my attentions for many years.”

"Well. You have my terms. I wish to paint you.”

"Please, I will pay you as well --”

"I do not ask --”

He pulled his wallet from within his heavy black coat and thumbed out a sheaf of notes. British pounds, she observed. Sound currency. Everything about this man seemed solid in the extreme. He counted briefly, then laid the notes on the table beside him and looked up.

"I shall be honored to have you paint me, Mme. Morisot. However, if you decide not to afterward, I shall fully understand."

PREPARING THE CANVAS, mixing the temperas, cleaning the brushes --all these details comprised for Berthe the closest thing she had ever found to religious ritual. Even her wedding had been a thing to tolerate, a nuisance. She smiled, remembering what she told her brother afterward. "I went through this ceremony without the least pomp, in a plain dress and hat, like the old woman that I am and with no guests." Old woman. She was amused by that now. She had been thirty-three at the time she had married Eugene and thought she

knew what age meant. Since Eugene's death she did know. It meant loneliness. At least, she thought, I am not a burden to anyone. Money had never been difficult, her family had seen to that. Attention --specifically its absence --had always been a problem. People did not take the new art very seriously, even less so when done by a woman, but after Manet's death a sudden interest had caused a rise in everyone's fortunes. Her paintings sold at auction now and Degas, at least, had made sure she received her due. Her reputation, her position, always problematic in polite society, now carried weight. A heavy pounding at her door broke the reverie. She wiped her hands and went to answer it. A wagon

stood in the narrow lane and two workmen waited at its gate while a third stood at her door.

"Yes?"

"Uh, we have a delivery for Mme. Morisot," he said, doffing his soiled cap.

"That is I."

He thrust a notebook and pencil toward her. "The manifest, please." She took the pencil and signed. He bowed awkwardly and gestured to the other two. They lowered the gate and pulled a crate from the wagon bed. The crate was roughly three feet on a side. Berthe led them to her studio and indicated a place on the floor. The workmen glanced nervously at the canvases standing about, mostly half-finished works, muttered

good-days to her, and hurried out. When she reached the door the wagon was already pulling away. Berthe watched it until it rounded a corner.

She shrugged and returned to the studio.

Berthe picked up her prybar and walked around the crate, studying it. She had not expected this. She chose a board and jammed the iron bar in. The nails came out easily, for which she was thankful. She lifted off the top. A vague, stale odor escaped and she wrinkled her nose. An envelope lay atop the straw stuffing.

"Mme. Morisot, Please forgive the impersonal nature of this procedure. I do not wish to distract you from any

reactions which may prove important. Forgive me the macabre circumstance. Within is the subject. V.H." She pulled out straw until she came to a canvas wrap. She found the loose ends and pulled. The object weighed less than five pounds. The fabric felt quite cold and she carried it quickly to a table near her easel. She went back to the crate and pulled the rest of the straw out. Finding nothing more hidden within, she looked at the canvas-wrapped object suspiciously.

She ignored the ill-ease which increased as she unwrapped the canvas. The last fold revealed a head.

Berthe stepped back. No eyes --the sockets were empty --and no hair. The

cheeks were sunken on either side of a straight, lipless mouth. Its ivory whiteness lent it an abstract quality, like a cameo or a dream; it was marbled with fine bluish trceries. The straight nose ended in a slight hook, giving the whole an aristocratic aspect contrary to every other detail, which seemed ascetic, almost monkish. It stood on a short stump of neck. When she looked up the shadows had changed. Day had moved on. Berthe turned, mildly puzzled, her legs sore. She went to the kitchen and poured water. She drank thirstily, filled her cup again, then looked for something to eat. There was a plate of beef and cheese in her ice box. Seeing it, she realized that she was famished.

She had not eaten so much at one time since Eugene had died. Her daughter, Julie, would be pleased. Too bad she was away, in England. Berthe sat back from the kitchen table and stared at the ruin of the meal, amazed at herself. Berthe returned to her studio. The light slanted in through the wide windows, shadowing the head so that it appeared aglow, a thin nimbus encircling the bald skull. Her temperas were partially dried. Irritated, she began to mix new. It was sunset before she finished and the light had taken on a filmy, indistinct quality, selectively illuminating partial details throughout the studio. She sighed and covered the head for the night.

She poured a glass of wine and went

to her bedroom. She sat in the wingbacked chair beside her bed and sipped while staring out at the night sky. Berthe slept little anymore, less so with each passing year. Night had become more a companion than a release. She glanced at the unfinished letter to her daughter on her nightstand. Her fingers ached. It could wait for tomorrow. When she slept she dreamed of painting. It had been a bold move to ask the doctor to pose --she had done few men outside her family --but she did not feel she had to worry about scandal at her age. She did wonder, though, why now, after all this time, she found herself drawn to do a portrait of a stranger. Her body complained after sleeping the night in the

chair. Berthe made tea, ate a little bread, and went to the studio. She uncovered the head and went to her easel. She threw away the dried paints and started over. Her wrists pulled and her fingers moved stiffly, but she willed her way through the preparations. She did not look at the head until she was ready to work. The morning light was soft and gave her all the details unaccented by harsh shadows. She selected a piece of chalk and began sketching the outlines with quick semicircular strokes. She found herself referring to the head itself less and less as the shape developed. It became easier simply to concentrate on memory than to try to copy the features directly. Each time she looked at it,

something was different, a line had been misplaced, a proportion had shifted. Once, in her youth, she had suffered a severe eye problem which, for a time, terrified her that it might be permanent. She rubbed her eyes now, the old fear tingling in her chest, along the back of her scalp. Berthe tossed the chalk aside and stood. Her back twinged. She limped around the studio. It was well after noon and she found herself ravenously hungry again. After she ate, she looked at her sketch.

The lines were a muddle, like a bad map, chalk marks hacked and scrawled across each other around the vague outline of a head. Only the shape of the eye sockets was clear.

The light now slanting through the windows came directly in, harsh and sharp. The front of the head was in shadow. The eyes --empty sockets, she reminded herself --did not look so blind now.

Berthe mounted another blank canvas and selected another piece of chalk. Berthe dropped the pen and rubbed her fingers. The letter, half done, looked illegible.

"--I cannot complete the commission. For some reason beyond my comprehension I am unable to see the subject through my medium. I regret that I must --" I regret that I must...what?

"I regret, Eugene, that I must tell you I do not love you." She looked around,

startled. But it was her own voice, within her own head, nothing more. Ancient memories. She had not thought of those days since before Eugene had died. The hill was cold that day and they huddled close to keep warm. Neither had thought to bring a wrap, only canvases and paints and a basket with wine and bread. Eugene brought that, he always did, a sharp reminder of his romanticism.

And again he brought up the subject of marriage, a sharp reminder of his hopelessness.

"How could I have said no?" Berthe asked. "He was so earnest..." But there had always been his brother, Edouard, taller, more urbane, by far the talented

one. Berthe wanted to believe that she had not married Eugene because she could not have Edouard. She saw Eugene as a victim. Everyone around him, those he most wanted to be like, trapped him into an unachievable ambition. Berthe always wished to emancipate him, but found no way to free someone from a self that disappointed. In time she saw that such freedom would only dissolve him.

"I am not young," she had said.

"Nor am I. But we are friends. And..."

And, of course. Always and. The hillside had been cold, but Eugene, reliable, mediocre Eugene, had brought wine and an offer of solace.

"Then perhaps yes."

Berthe wiped at her cheeks as if expecting to find tears. Her skin was dry. She looked at the letter and slowly crumpled it.

SHE PROPPED THE MIRROR where she could see it from her easel. "If art is a reflection of life," she mused while she worked, "then perhaps life is but a reflection of death. So I will paint a reflection of death." It made as little sense out loud as it did quietly conceived, but Berthe did not pause. She moved the table bearing the head against the edge of the table with the mirror, then turned the head to face into the mirror.

"Now I just wait for the light," she sighed, satisfied. She sat down before

her canvas. No sketch this time, she had decided. Her paints were ready, brushes stacked. Berthe adjusted herself for comfort and looked into the mirror.

She saw only her studio.

"Damn," she whispered, and got up. She adjusted the mirror and went back to her seat. The mirror reflected the edge of her easel. She leaned to the right and saw herself appear.

She stared at the head, then looked back into the mirror. The light caught her forehead, the crests of her cheeks, the tip of her nose. Her hair, shadowed, seemed its original rich chestnut brown and for a moment Berthe felt as if she were gazing at a portrait of herself much younger. She rubbed her eyes and went around to

shift the mirror again. As she turned and looked down at the head, a cloud passed through the light, softening the harsh angles of the dead face. She could not imagine that this had ever been a handsome man. Compelling, certainly.

She sat down before her easel and looked into the mirror. Empty.

She blew a harsh breath and glared at the head. "Damn you," she hissed, reached out, and, fingers pressed down on the top of its skull, turned it to face her. She jerked her fingers away and rubbed them. The head felt cold. Berthe chided herself. "The imagination is a dangerous pet," she said, flexed her fingers, and lifted a brush.

She painted methodically, stroke by

stroke, shaping the head with absences. The shadows first, then the dark suggestions embedded in the shadows. Berthe hardly looked at the head, again finding it easier to work from snatches and memory than to try to peer closely at the object.

She completed the canvas as the last light of dusk faded. Her eyes burned and her back felt encased in stone. When she stood a hundred small pains crackled from her ankles up to her neck. She dropped the brush into the clay cup with the others.

The image was too dark now to appraise. She pressed her fingers into her kidneys, flexed gently. Her ears filled with a rush of blood. Let it wait

till morning. She walked carefully to the kitchen.

Halfway through her dinner she realized that she had had no breakfast and no lunch. She ached from sitting rigidly before her easel all day. She poured herself wine and went back to the studio. She stood in the doorway. On the opposite side, now shrouded in darkness, was a closet. Within she had stored all of Eugene's canvases, his sketchbooks, his easels. There were a few paintings they had even done together. Berthe had never allowed anyone to see them. She had always yearned for uniqueness, the recognition that she was her own self and not the shadow of another. The collaborations

had been made in the same spirit as lovemaking --privately, intimate revelations --and, Berthe felt, their meaning would diminish from exhibition.

"Or are you just ashamed of him?"

Berthe frowned at the voice. Her own, tree, but when had she started speaking out loud to herself? She looked out over the rest of the night-hidden studio. The mirror glowed. Beyond, the wide windows let in a pale blue light that delicately dusted corners and edges and flat surfaces, jumbling the shapes into an alien landscape. The light from the mirror, though, seemed bluer, a bit brighter, as if giving back more than it received. An illusion, Berthe thought,

and smiled at the twinge of inspiration. She stepped into the studio and picked her way to the easel.

She set down the wine and removed the finished canvas, setting it off to the left. The blue light lifted the pattern of paint from its surface in meaningless swirls. Berthe began humming quietly to herself as she mounted a blank board to the easel. She took a drink, settled herself, and lifted a brush. She felt giddy, as a child embarking on some forbidden adventure. When she gazed at the mirror it did not surprise her to see a face gaze back at her, clear and still, waiting with an expression of amused tolerance.

"I am ready," she said to the image.

"Be patient. These things take time." The paints had begun to dry, but Berthe managed. The dim rectangle seemed unreal, as if it were no surface at all but a window, and the colors, whatever they were, did not flow onto it so much as into it to hang suspended against the depths.

It surprised her how quickly the work proceeded. She sang to herself happily as she painted. Her glass was empty when she set the brush down. She grunted and slid from the stool, plucked the glass from the table, and went to the kitchen.

She moved from room to room of the house, her steps unerring, studying the walls and the furnishings in the

monochrome illumination. The moon, she thought, must be enormous tonight. She saw everything with the kind of clarity still spring water lends to objects underneath it, slightly magnified and wetly still.

"I have lived here," she said and paused, frowning to herself. There ought to be more to that sentence, she thought, but it seemed complete enough. She had lived here, for thirty years. She and Eugene. She and her work. She and her children, her friends, her dreams. Clients, plans, creditors, colleagues, arguments, laughter, love...regret.

"I regret, Eugene, that I must tell you I do not love you."

"I know. But I love you and that is

enough.”

“Is it?”

He shrugged, looking perfectly foolish in his nightshirt, pale ankles much too thin to support all his immanent hope. “You may borrow some of mine from time to time.”

And there was the bed in which, together, they had lent each other what they could of affection, companionship, intent, and, from time to time, passion. Berthe came to believe that she was for Eugene little more than a mirror in which he saw his own feelings reflected back. She had tried to give him what she could but perhaps, in the end, even that had not been necessary. What do mirrors actually have of their own? Perhaps she

might have found out with Edouard. But Edouard had been a prism through which light bent onto his canvases. Whose soul would she have been reflecting with him?

The mirror still glowed in the studio. She shrugged and returned to her easel. There was still time to do another before the light faded. DAWN DROVE HER TO BED. She slept fitfully for a few hours, then awoke to the blazing light of midmorning, her eyes slitted in pain. She went to her parlor and took down the heavy velvet curtains and put them up over the windows in her studio. She used old canvases to fill in the cracks where sunlight found a way in and, satisfied with the thick quality of the

darkness, she went back to the easel.

Berthe wondered briefly at the certainty of her technique as she mixed new colors in the dark. She had learned over time not to question too much. Use the moment when it comes, Cassatt had told her, liberate the image before it escapes you. Her early work, Degas had said, had always relied too much on the intellect. Observation must not be inextricably joined to analysis. Then, when her eyes had threatened to fail, she had taken the advice to heart and had learned how to respond first, then understand later. Still, it was all mirrors, and mirrors never satisfied.

The reflections in this mirror, though, never stayed still. She dipped her

brushes, carried the pigments to the canvas, filled the vacant planes. A flicker, a shift, a change in the quality of illumination, all demanded a new canvas.

Her belly knotted finally and she went to the kitchen. It was night again. She found half a loaf of bread, the open end hardening. She broke it off and dipped it in wine and ate. As her hunger eased she stared out the window. She had bought this house, it had always remained hers even after she married Eugene. He had never asked that it be any different. It would not be anyway, she realized, since with his death it would have reverted to her after all.

"What was it you felt in me?" she

asked. She drew a deep breath, luxuriating in the sensation. She had not worked this hard, this intently for years. With Eugene's death the desire had all but vanished.

"I did not love you, but I miss you..."

"It is enough."

Berthe turned, peering into the darkness of the studio. The only light came from the mirror. More....? I am tired.

More.

Berthe opened her eyes slowly to the pounding on the door. She gazed up at the warmly lit ceiling of her bedroom, sleepily fascinated by the richness of color and the restful shifting of shadow from the trees outside her window. The

pounding stopped and started again.

She rolled over. The myriad aches had melded into one general agony. Her head throbbed. She squinted at the window. A light breeze made the curtains dance gracefully.

Voices drifted up from below the window. Berthe sighed heavily and rubbed her eyes. The window was closer than the door, she decided, and pushed herself to her feet.

"Madame Morisot!"

Berthe leaned from the window and stared down at two men. One was broad-shouldered and dressed in workman's clothes with a worn, shapeless cap on his head, the other was a bit taller, distinguished, with a beard,

dressed in a brown suit. Both men looked familiar, but for different reasons.

"Yes?" she said.

"Are you all right?" the distinguished man asked.

"Yes, yes, quite..." Then she recognized them. Francois delivered her foods from the market. She smiled at him "I'll be right down. Forgive me, I've overslept."

Berthe pulled on her robe, embarrassed then. They must, she thought, think I'm mad, leaning out the window like that. What time was it, anyway? Wincing at each step, she descended the stairs to the kitchen. Her legs threatened to cramp, as if on the

previous day she had walked twenty miles. She pulled open the door and Francois looked immediately relieved. He came in with a box and went straight to her pantry.

"Monsieur," she said to the other gentleman.

"We grew concerned," he said. "Are you well?"

"I don't know...I have just...I am not quite awake yet, Monsieur. Forgive me..."

"Not at all, forgive me. I hope I have not interrupted...?" Francois went out and returned with another box. As he passed her Berthe saw a bunch of grapes and snatched them out. Francois did not seem to notice and continued to the ice

box.

"I am afraid, Monsieur, I was unable to fulfill your request," she said around a mouthful.

He blinked, but otherwise his expression did not change.

"I expected word sooner, I admit," he said finally, "that you could not. But as the days passed I began to hope. May I see what you have?" For a moment Berthe felt an intense urgency to refuse. Puzzled, she stood there eating her grapes, worrying at her feelings, until Francois cleared his throat.

"Should I bring more, Madame Morisot?" he asked when she looked at him.

"You've eaten everything here."

"Is there enough wine?" she asked.

"Well, as much as you usually need for a week..." Francois seemed uneasy, embarrassed.

"If I need more I'll send for it, Francois. Thank you." She went to the cabinet where she kept her market money and counted out his payment, then added a couple livres.

Francois thanked her and backed out of the door. Berthe headed matter-of-factly toward the studio.

"Come, Monsieur."

Berthe stopped three steps into the studio. It was still dark, only the light from the hallway showing her a vague path through the stacked canvases.

"Goodness," he said.

She picked her way to the window and threw open the curtains. Light flooded the space, momentarily blinding her. She turned away, fingers to her eyes until they adjusted.

Across the room he stood near the door, his own eyes wide with a powerfully checked astonishment. They were very clear, very pale, and she remembered then that she had wished to paint him.

Between them the studio was cluttered with canvases. One remained on her easel, but dozens filled the countertops, the desks, propped on the floor against table legs, walls, in the chairs and against stools. Berthe started counting them, stopped at thirty-three, and

searched for the head.

"Ah," she said, realizing that the mirror blocked her view of it. She went around the opposite side of the easel, stepping over finished work stacked carelessly on the floor. How many had she done? Her fingers ached dully. She stopped before the easel. On the board mounted there dark blues and greens whorled around a bold head, high brow below thick black hair that fell in a braid that draped over the right shoulder. Proud eyes stared out at the world from above high cheekbones. Bearded, strong, and somehow very old. A silver ring depended from his right ear. The entire effect was of imminent dynamism, as if he were about to leave the studio to tend

to the conquest of a city or a country.

"I don't remember..." she began, then looked around at the other canvases. Men and women, different ages, different colors, different eras. Large panels and small cameo size works littered the studio. Many were plain people, unexceptional except for the antiquity of their clothes or the evident foreignness of their race or culture. A small clutch of them were more modern. Her workplace was a wreck of used material. The remnants of paint and brushes, broken charcoals, rags piled on rags, attested to the quantity of work produced.

The mirror stood where it had since -- when?

"What day is this, Monsieur?"

"Wednesday"

"The date?"

"The fifth, Madame."

"Ah."

"When I did not hear from you after six days I became concerned."

"Yes, of course."

"Eh...where is the head?"

"Right there--"

She pointed to an empty space before the mirror.

The gentleman touched the countertop and dusted his fingers through a thick layer of chalky residue. He looked at the mirror, then inquiringly at Berthe. She shook her head, dismayed, and looked about at the stacks of canvases. "I could

not see it clearly, so..."

"You painted its reflection," he said, nodding. "Of course. Sensible." He waved at the paintings. "And these?" When Berthe did not reply, he nodded again.

"Vlad Tsepes was an individual of many parts. Not a simple subject."

"I apologize, Monsieur."

"May I ask for what?"

"I...did not produce what you requested."

"On the contrary. These are quite satisfactory." Berthe saw him study the paintings, recognized the intent expression of someone who understands the work, feels the innate quality and power. She wanted to argue, wanted,

above all, an explanation, but she did not wish to disturb his pleasure.

Suddenly he went directly to one small portrait and lifted it with his fingertips. "This one...we were friends, long ago. He was the first I knew of that had been taken. I had forgotten..." He looked up, eyes moist, and nodded.

"All of them must be his victims." He set the painting down and turned away from her for a moment. "It is more than I expected," he said finally. He looked up.

"Now, the matter of payment."

"For what, Monsieur?"

"For all of them." He waved at the portraits cluttering the studio.

"Are you serious?"

He nodded.

Berthe shook her head. She named a price and wondered immediately what she had said.

"Oh, no, that is much too low. I will write a draft for what I believe is appropriate."

"As you wish..."

She began gathering the paintings, stacking them according to size. After a time she thought she recognized the look they all shared in common. Relief. She had seen it only a few times in her life, and in each instance it had been Eugene who had shown it to her. Once when she had agreed to marry him, again when she actually gave her vows. And again the hour of his death, though then it had been overshadowed by weariness. In each

portrait she saw that same expression, over and over, the look of someone who has been laboring in an impossible task that is now complete.

When she turned she saw it again in her client's face. He seemed now so relieved that for a moment she did not know him. He gave her a bank draft, drawn on a Dutch bank, and smiled.

At the end of the day he had hired a wagon and workmen to load the collection.

He paid them and gave them instructions where to take the cargo.

"Thank you, Madame. You have exceeded my expectations." He hesitated, then asked. "Do you wish still to paint me?"

Berthe looked up and saw him reflected in the mirror. His eyes were in shadow, but there were highlights within, faint and disappointing.

"Yes, I would. But it does not have to be at once."

"Then I will take my leave. I shall come when you request me." She nodded absently and he withdrew. Gazing into the now blank mirror she knew that she would not paint him. He did not need liberating anymore. Her fingers twinged. She went to the door and saw his carriage moving off down the street. Dusk was coming. She went to the kitchen and ate some beef, drank some wine, slowly, watching the light grow dim.

Berthe stood in the midst of her studio. The canvases gone, it seemed much too large. She walked around the desks and counters, circling her easel. She stopped and looked down.

Below the easel stood one more canvas. She frowned. He had forgotten one. She sighed impatiently and stooped to pick it up. Her back ached dully as she lifted it to the table.

"Oh."

It was her original charcoal sketch of the head, made the first day. The lines smeared and darted, a confusing mass of conflicting intentions around two blank areas where the eyes ought to be. Just as well it was left behind. She brushed off the thick dust from the counter and

propped it up. A senseless map. The mirror caught her eye and, smiling, she turned the canvas to face it.

By the time she had it positioned properly, evening stole the last of the light.

She could start in the morning. She made her way to the door. Glancing back, she saw her windows, deep blue, and, in the center of the studio, the mirror glowed.

"Oh," she said, "just one more, then." Berthe returned to her easel and lifted a brush. "Of course, you were once a victim, too."