Leaving Madrid

By Sarah Manigne

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1

I had dozed off. I don’t think I heard the first explosion. It was the shock of the brakes that woke me. Instinctively, I resisted the force that swept me forward, and I felt a horrible pain in my back and neck.

I opened my eyes. The lights in the car were out, but sparks and flickering fluorescents flashed around me. Screams came from everywhere. My head was in a vise, deprived of its senses.

Why didn’t I understand at once? At first, I had the urge to stay put right there in my seat. I felt tired. I didn't even have the energy to try to understand. How long did I sit there, stunned? If I had to prove my physical courage, to tap into some as yet undiscovered inner power, I knew I would surrender in advance. I’d always felt my body was a tenuous mechanism. When others were keen to push past their limits, to push the effort and the pain a little further, I let go. Sometimes, I’ve wondered whether it could be a verifiable physical trait, an inability to produce some precious endorphin, or whether ultimately, it’s a moral weakness. But in the end, perhaps it was best to stay calm, to be patient. I’ve always hated outbursts of panic and hysteria.

A woman cried out, "It's a bomb! It's a bomb!" and everything changed. Suddenly, I knew what I had to do. I had to get out. I absolutely had to get out. I felt cold. Screams slashed through my mind. I couldn’t see anything. Was it dense smoke clouding my vision, or were there sparks forcing me to close my eyes? I stretched my arms out and pushed, with all my strength, at whatever was blocking my way. Somehow, I found my feet beneath me, one after the other, almost twisting my ankles, and pulled myself from the train car.

On the platform, I stopped for a moment. There were so many people. Lifeless bodies and blood on the ground. Or were they body parts? I saw a blue sneaker, and I remember asking myself what it was doing there, thinking it was in the way, this shoe in the middle of the platform, that people should be more careful.

Then, I came out of my stupor and, running, reached the escalators. At that moment, an explosion sounded, followed by another, even louder. It seems these were the second and the third. But for me they were the first two, the only ones I heard and can’t stop hearing. And a suffocating cloud of dust, thick as soot, covered everything. The foul smell of smoke or blood, my burning throat, my eyes stinging so painfully I wanted to tear them out. My skin felt incandescent, a blaze that begged to be plunged in icy water. I heard thousands of cries, sobs, and moans, an unbearable din. It seemed as if the whole world were screaming, and suddenly I knew what terror was, terror in its raw state.

I had lost my bearings. I searched frantically for the station’s exit. Coming at me, from the opposite direction, I saw yellow everywhere, yellow helmets, men and women in yellow vests, men and women fighting their way in to this place as we tried to get out. And I didn't understand. I grabbed a young woman by the sleeve and tried to stop her. I kept repeating, "It’s a bomb! It’s a bomb!"

In the street, sirens and flashing lights, the big yellow stars of the rescue vans. The ambulances from Madrid’s emergency services arrived, the inscription “SUMMA 112” spread across the yellow vehicles in light blue letters. Had I known before that day to call “112” in an emergency? Could I have come up with anything else to dial besides the goddamn French “18”? I wasn’t sure I’d remember those three numbers even after that day. I’d never been good at that kind of thing, never been able to remember a phone number or even write it down correctly when someone quickly dictated it to me. Farther away, the yellow vests of the municipal police, the blue helmets and jackets of the firefighters, with reflective stripes and fluorescent-yellow writing on the back. It was strange, all that yellow, and I kept thinking about how, in France, the emergency services were not so yellow.

It was just after 7:30 in the morning; the evening before had been so sweet.

Angel had the night off from the restaurant. He’d done some shopping, bought a delicious red, and served us two glasses while making dinner. His apartment didn’t have all the advantages of Madrid, but it was full of charm and much more spacious than mine, with a large, well-equipped kitchen. I had slowly begun to colonize it. Books lay scattered on the coffee table and at the foot of the bed. A monograph of Zurbarán's paintings lay beside a work on virgin saints and martyrs in seventeenth-century Spain. Museum catalogs and postcard reproductions of paintings were scattered on the bookshelves. I’d slept at his place, which I hadn't done often before. For a long time, I’d refused, always claiming I had to get up early, whereas his nights began in the earliest hours of the day, when he got home from his shift.

In the morning, I had risen silently so as not to wake him. The trip from Alcalá to Henares to Madrid was just over thirty minutes, but I had wanted to arrive at the museum early to prepare for a meeting with the chief curator. As long as I didn’t hang around too long, I could take a quick shower, leave with wet hair, and wait until I arrived in Madrid to gulp a sweet café con leche and eat one of the pan con tomate that I loved so much, even though they weren’t typical of the region. With a little luck, if I rushed, I thought I could catch the 7:01 train. I walked quickly through the empty early-morning streets. As I climbed the last stairs, I could already hear the screeching of the train’s brakes. There it was: red roof, white sides, and, in multiple places, the red three-quarters circle inside of a white circle, like a countdown or an unfinished download, the logo of the Spanish railway.

Would it have changed anything if I had slept in longer that morning? If I had missed the 7:01 train? If I’d taken the time to dry my hair, I would’ve caught the 7:04. But five hundred meters before its arrival at Atocha, alongside Calle de Téllez, four bombs would explode and kill more people than were killed in the station. Or else I could have poured myself a cup of coffee and run to the 7:10. Then, the explosion would have left me on the ground at El Pozo station in the suburbs. The platforms there were protected by a wall, and yet police officers had found body parts on the other side. Days later, I would cry with rage as I read the testimony of a bus driver from line 24 who had seen human limbs flying as he passed close by the station that morning. I cried like I would never stop. Maybe I could have gone back and kissed Angel again and snuggled in the sheets, breathing in his scent that I loved so much even in the morning. I had thought about it for an instant. Then, I would have hurried so as not to miss the 7:14. In the end, it wouldn’t have mattered. That one was wiped out, too, at the Santa Eugenia station. Ten bombs had exploded that morning, ten bombs in three minutes. The terror had cut a merciless path. And I had boarded train number 21431, six cars, destination Alcobendas-San Sebastián de los Reyes, at 7:01. I’d even had the time to walk a little farther down the tracks to get into one of the rear cars, which were always less crowded. And then the terror caught me.

Once I got out of Atocha station, I sat down on the sidewalk. Some people held compresses against their temples, against a knee or an elbow, to apply pressure to a wound or else automatically, in a desperate attempt to contain what had been shattered. Some of the spilled blood was drying—crusted in hair, obstructing vision—but the dread was too intense for anyone to try to remedy the situation. Had we even realized we were alive? How could we be sure, in the midst of all these bodies and this pain, that this wasn’t hell? Everyone’s body trembled. Mine too. I could see it in my hands. I could feel it in my chest. I didn’t know what was causing this involuntary vibration, my sobbing or the immense fear now lodged in me. And then there was silence. Except for the groaning and the tears, there didn’t seem to be any other noise. It was a stunning silence, like a solid, tangible mass. It was a silence in the midst of chaos. How could I hear so many screams, howling sirens, and at the same time think I had never heard such silence? It was opaque, almost woolen. A silence without an equivalent. Its texture was nothing like the silences I’d known, the ones I had sometimes cultivated at home or at work. And for a moment, I wondered: Was it possible I couldn’t hear? Had my hearing been damaged? What if all the screaming was coming from inside me, my body, my mind?

A man came up and wrapped me in one of those metallic survival blankets. There were dozens of us sitting or lying on the ground. The gold of the blankets sparkled, and again the yellow was everywhere. I remembered a late-night conversation I’d had with Angel a few weeks earlier. I’d mentioned the painting I was working on and the crumpled yellow train held in a delicate hand by the girl on the canvas. I had spent days studying the exact composition of the tiny scales peeling off the painting. To me, the fabric had to be restored to a brighter yellow, a gilded yellow like a reflection of gold, both intense and light. I’d told Angel about all the gold fabrics painted by Francisco de Zurbarán: citrine sleeves, golden palms and flowers, and lemon-yellow petticoats. That evening, once again, I had opened the books, spread out the images, and typed away on the computer to make my Zurbarán appear, Zurbarán of the saints bedecked for heaven, of martyrs dressed in worldly ladies’ clothes. And I pointed out to Angel that all that yellow was the precious metal flowing from the New World, giving color to the Spanish Golden Age. All that yellow was the gold of the Great Century. Later, at Atocha, in the month of March, the stretched-out bodies, the lifeless bodies, the dislocated bodies, the martyred bodies, were wrapped in this color of kings.

2

Sitting there, I waited. Trembling, I waited. Time hung suspended. Madrid had stopped breathing. Men and women ran. Flashing lights spun. The city was transfixed by sirens. I apprehended these things in slow motion, in a cottony state that rendered all of it unreal. At some point, I heard phones ringing, thousands of rings spinning through the fresh morning air. But it wasn’t then—it wasn’t until much later—that I realized my phone wasn’t ringing. It was still in my pocket, and it hadn’t rung. No one was worried about me. No one was frantically searching for news of my whereabouts.

I waited I don’t know how long, and then I left. I didn’t know what I’d been waiting for, and suddenly I felt I had to get away, away from this place, this silence, this yellow inscribed on my pupils. I clumsily folded or, rather, crumpled the survival blanket. I set it on the sidewalk near a bench, attempting to leave behind some semblance of order, and I started walking. I ran away and left them. All of them. There was blood on me. I didn’t know where it came from. My head was sore but my arms, streaked in red, worked perfectly.

A car pulled up alongside me and the driver offered to help, to take me to the emergency room or drive me home. Hundreds of people showed up that morning: helping, being useful, being there. They came by car and on foot. They came out of their apartments, arms full of sheets, blankets, and water, arms to carry, arms to comfort. At that point they knew better than we did— better than all those on the ground, wandering, wounded—what had just happened.

I declined the help, maybe with a gesture, or more likely I explained that I worked nearby and didn’t have far to go. I just had to find the Paseo del Prado. For some reason, I couldn’t see it. I had no idea which side of the station I’d exited when I left. By this time, I should’ve been able to see the three bottlenecked lanes of the boulevard, the traffic lights where cars roll to a late stop. I should have heard the cacophony of horns. Each morning, I walked alongside the Royal Botanical Garden, and I often returned at the end of the day to walk back up the promenade.

I still don’t know how I finally arrived at the Prado. Maybe I followed the posters hung on poles along the Paseo, posters touting the current exhibition, still lifes by the eighteenth-century painter Luis Egidio Meléndez. For several weeks, the reproductions of his apples, his pears, his alcarazas and other jugs and pitchers had guided my steps and accompanied my thoughts on the way to the museum. Each day, I discovered new details: a glass oil bottle with a stopper made of cloth, a small wooden barrel, or maybe it was cork, intended to refill what seemed to be a delicate flask of wine or liquor. This had been my soft approach to the canvas that awaited me. I’d contemplated the differences between the still lifes, or bodegóns, of Meléndez and those of Zurbarán. I had studied a white jug: sober and uniquely glossed by the light in one image and embellished, at the heart of a composition of pears and bread, in another. Perhaps that morning the posters were my little white pebbles, my points of reference in the midst of chaos. And already everything had another flavor. The almost transparent skin of what I’d imagined, several days earlier, to be sour cherries—I didn’t know the Spanish name—looked to me like shapeless flesh. Sweetness, softness, no longer existed. Everything was nausea and revulsion. The meats, the tranche of pink salmon I’d admired just a few days before, made my heart lurch. Meléndez had a taste for spoiled fruit, bruised pears and apples, wounds I now found unbearable to contemplate.

I was told afterward that I’d arrived haggard, clothes stained with blood, hair knotted with a mixture of dust, plastic, and flesh. Hair absorbs everything. I’d never noticed this before. It captures life and death and their smells. It took dozens of shampoos finally get rid of the stench, to calm the temptation to furiously plow my scalp with my fingers.

It quickly became evident where I’d come from. I can still hear the whispers:

—Do you think she came directly from Atocha?

—She could’ve come from Téllez. I think the explosions there were even worse. . .

—Should we take her to the hospital?

—I suggested it. She didn’t answer. And anyway, on the radio, they’re saying the hospitals are overwhelmed. Doce de Octubre and La Princesa can’t accept any more patients. They’ve set up a field hospital for first aid in the Daoíz y Velarde.

—It doesn’t seem to be her blood. She can walk, and she’s moving her arms and hands normally.

—But what if she has a head injury? How can we be sure?

—All she’s talked about is the painting. She said she wants to see the painting.

—She’s in shock.

—Have her sit down. She’s so pale.

—Do you think she can hear us? She doesn’t seem to hear us.

—Alice, can you hear us?

—Maybe we need to let her see it. Maybe it will do her good.

—I don’t know what to do. Did they say anything on the radio? How to handle someone with a concussion?

—I think if she refuses to go to the hospital, we should take her home and inform someone. She can’t be alone in this state.

—Do you know if she has anyone?

The next day, I didn't get up. It was Friday, March 12, 2004. It was raining. Millions of people took to the streets of Spain to cry out in anger and sadness, to express their compassion, and I didn't get up.

I had arrived in Madrid seven months earlier.

3

I’d arrived in Madrid in the middle of August. The airport was almost deserted, and I quickly collected my bags. When I went outside to find a cab, I immediately felt the intense, dry heat. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. On the ride, I saw the deep blue sky, clear, cloudless, marked only by a few vapor trails from planes. Rare to see such an intense blue. The uninterrupted, musical flow of faraway voices on the radio confirmed I had returned to Spain. The driver asked about the reason for my visit, the length of my stay, visibly delighted to hear me answer in decent Spanish.

The museum had rented an apartment nearby, so I could avoid a long commute. In our email exchanges, the coordinator had asked about my preferences, specifically whether or not I required air conditioning. I hadn’t paid much attention to this point, not liking air conditioning and having never been to Madrid during the dry season. An apartment with charm, in an old building, rather than one of the many new buildings with dicey workmanship that had recently popped up in Spain, had seemed preferable to me.

The concierge opened the door when I arrived at Calle Atocha, and I climbed behind her to the sixth floor, where I found a small, overheated apartment just below the roof. There was a large bedroom and a small kitchen area. Fortunately, the living room opened onto a flowery terrace overlooking the back of the Reina Sofía Museum. The terrace was covered with dozens of plant pots of all sizes and shapes. Cacti blossomed, and honeysuckle scented the air. The noise of the street barely reached us. The cries of the children playing in the square along Calle de Santa Isabel were a distant, gentle reminder that we were right in the heart of the city.

The concierge spoke quickly. I didn’t fully understand. She showed me around, explaining that I should water in the evening, and definitely not in the middle of the day as long as it was this hot. The cacti didn’t need water at all, which would cut down the work. Then she talked about her son and grandchildren, gone to live in the United States, whom she rarely saw. She added that my parents must have been happy I wasn't too far away, that they would have to come discover Madrid, but afterward, later, when it wasn’t so hot. She chatted about the pleasant autumn and Retiro Park, which wasn’t far, where I might find a little shade if it didn’t cool off. She told me the city was still quite empty, that families had fled the stifling heat, that I would only discover the real Madrid in a few weeks when the world was back, when the shops had reopened.

I’d been called to the Spanish capital for a painting by Francisco de Zurbarán, a work held at the Prado, acquired in 1997 and never exhibited. I’d received several photographs, a dating of 1655, and a size: 206 x 140 cm. It was large. Zurbarán had always painted his saints in slightly smaller sizes, not to mention his “Agnus Dei” and his still lifes. I’d worked for months on his Saint Lucy in Chartres, which was about half the size. I had thought that, for Zurbarán, a monumental representation would have to be a group scene: the adoration of the Magi, the burial of Saint Catherine, or even Christ on the cross. This painting was titled *alegoría de la Caridad—*or *Allegory of Charity*. Perhaps the representation of a theological virtue justified the dimension. Among the classics on the same theme, Simon Vouet’s *La Charité céleste*, hung in the heights of the Richelieu wing of the Louvre, was roughly the same size. I quickly searched the internet for a reproduction of this canvas, which I had never liked. Vouet's women were buxom, flesh overflowing, noses red, drapes crumpled awkwardly around their forms.

As for the date—1655—this was new territory for me. Until then, I’d worked only on paintings from the period spanning 1630 to 1640, Zurbarán’s glory years. On the contrary, art historians had portrayed the era around 1655 as a time of trials for the painter: the death of his son, his last years in Seville, then devastated by a plague epidemic, and his departure for Madrid. Scholars suggested that Zurbarán’s talent had diminished by this later period, that he was by then producing only poor quality series for the Mexican and Peruvian territories.

In fewer than ten years, I’d become an expert on Zurbarán's work, or at least his saints and martyrs, which is no doubt why I was called upon. For the first time, here, I would work with an allegorical figure and not, strictly speaking, a saint.

It had begun at the end of my studies, when I was invited to work on the painting of Saint Lucy in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Chartres. For a mere intern, it was a great opportunity, but I wasn’t delighted at the idea of spending months in Chartres. I had hoped the canvas would travel to Paris, but in the end, I went to Beauce. The canvas was somber. The young saint had a pallor that gave her an almost greenish complexion. She had dark-hair, a simple handful of which was pulled back at the top of her head, her eyes closed. The painting seemed to emanate a boundless sadness. At first, I didn’t like it.

During those autumn days, the rain and gray weather surrounded me. The cathedral seemed oppressive, until I finally entered it early one morning. After that, I went twenty times a day. I changed out my sneakers, which squeaked on the paved floor, for silent, felt soles. Each day, before going to see Lucy, I savored this astonishing moment. The blue of the stained-glass windows, barely pierced by the pale light that transfixed the clouds, shifted me into another world, an in-between time. Day by day, I could better decipher the mostly-blackened sculptures of the choir enclosure. I greeted them one by one.

After Saint Lucy, there was a Saint Dorothy, a Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a Saint Agnes, and even a Saint Matilda. Some were by Zurbarán, others by his disciples or members of his workshop. Usually, the owners or dealers first wanted to obtain a condition report and a scientific file, supported by multiple photographs and observations, as well as infrared radiation and X-ray images. Then, we might proceed with a surface cleaning followed by a lightening of the varnish and some retouching, if necessary, and finally a revarnish. Sometimes, a true restoration presented long-term work that anchored me somewhere for months and absorbed me completely.

I went wherever I chose, sometimes staying a long while, other times a few short weeks. I loved this untethered life. I’d quickly given up the idea of keeping a pied-à-terre in Paris. I had no interest in being there. I returned, I left again. Sometimes, I didn’t even pass through France. My heart tightened when the plane touched down in the Hexagon and lightened as soon as I took off. I’d made my mind up not to try to understand, not to try to remove the thorn I felt hopelessly stuck in me. Far away, I lived, I breathed, I worked. Far away, I forgot that my life was like a flight. It had the flavor of an adventure, changing language, lodging, food, clothes, and relationships.

Back then, I loved these young girls called “saints.” Though they were figures linked by legend to the Roman or Muslim persecutions, I often had the feeling, with Zurbarán, that I was dealing with ingenues preparing for a debut at the Rose Ball. They were made of flesh and bone, and at once immensely fragile and immeasurably strong. They were my sisters and my daughters. Only the particulars of their martyrdoms, and the exhibition of their remains, of their sacrifices, brought me back to their truths.

For months, in Chartres, Saint Lucy held before me a pair of eyes on a pewter plate. And yet there was no blood, no sword stuck in her throat, as she is so often represented. Each morning, I greeted her respectfully, and sometimes with a slight smile on my lips, as I thought about the story of her martyrdom. Before Diocletian subjected Lucy to a long litany of horrors, there was the anecdote of the sacrifice of her eyes. Lucy of Syracuse had decided to consecrate her life and her belongings to the poor, but the man to whom she had been promised in marriage, against her will, wouldn’t hear of it. As he continued to press for the wedding, Lucy asked why he was so attached to her, and Diocletian responded, “Your eyes!” The story goes that Lucy picked up a small knife and ripped them out, presenting the eyes to him on a pewter tray. It was funny, but a biting, black humor and, ultimately, a rather modern feminism, even if the sacrifice was made for God and not for herself.

The eyes on the tray were strange. Wide open on the dish, they looked somehow disproportionate. Would it be possible, in theory, to fix them back into the eye sockets of this girl, so slight and slender, who stood before me? I was haunted by these eyes, like I had, at other times, been disturbed by those of Dalí or Buñuel. I saw them everywhere, even in the votive candle I lit some mornings in the cathedral without any particular request—me, perfectly atheist—only for the quietude the gesture brought. As the candle melted, the wick created, in the heart of the white wax, a little red eye. I was fascinated by this bloody tear, this tiny pupil fixed on me.

When the canvas was cleaned, the colors appeared and I loved her passionately, like an unfamiliar double. The puffy yellow sleeves of her dress were cinched by a ribbon reminiscent of a bridal garter. Her immense red cape, its train pulled around to the front, contrasted with the greyish black of her dress. I had spent hours reinvigorating the subtle feathers the painter had placed at her wrists like precious bracelets of down. And when the moment came to go, I had a hard time leaving her. It was an intense and unexpected physical lack which prompted me to accept the next restoration I was offered, even though that time the Zurbarán canvas was abroad. That’s how it all began and how it carried on for years.

I’d chosen this profession of conservator-restorer without really understanding why. In an internship during my art history studies, it had occurred to me, suddenly obvious. I had been lost, and then I found myself. Though all these years I’ve often worked with tiny details, miniscule scales of paint, I’d always had the feeling of repairing something essential. Strangely, paintings were the only things that seemed reversible to me. Under the layer of grime, the wounds of time, I always believed I could give new life to the original beauty. In every other aspect of life, things felt more difficult, somehow unalterable.

If I poured boiling water into the teapot, I could only serve it once I’d waited an eternity. I was incapable of imagining that the water had cooled and the tea was now drinkable. Objects and places, once broken, spoiled, or deteriorated, seemed to remain that way forever. I didn’t wear a new item of clothing until months after I’d bought it, until the possessive attachment I had to it had faded, until I was finally ready to accept the irreparable wear and tear. But with the paintings, even when I doubted whether a restoration would be apparent to most people, I didn’t ever doubt the value of the work. I was caring for something, no matter how imperceptible.

So, with *Allegory of Charity*, like every time I was offered a restoration job, I’d had the feeling of being in an episode of *Mission Impossible*, asked to decide, in just a few moments, whether or not to accept the mission. I had read the data sheet, but not yet looked at the photos that sat on my desk for several days, face down. The same ritual each time: I discovered a canvas and, for weeks or months, I adopted it. I had accepted the offer—it had been almost unthinkable to refuse—and packed my bags.

4

In Spain, I had worked in Seville, Oviedo, Bilbao, Cadiz, and elsewhere, always only passing through the capital. I spent the first days after my arrival discovering the city. I didn’t yet have access to the canvas I would work on. I didn’t want to rush to visit the paintings of the master who had marked me so much: Saint Isabel of Portugal, exhibited at the Prado itself, one I wasn’t yet sure I liked, with her hard, round face, so unusual for Zurbarán, and above all, Saint Casilda at the Thyssen Museum. I postponed my visit to Saint Casilda like one defers a lovers’ tryst, happy to prolong, for a while, the uncertain state between desire and the terrible fear of disappointment.

So I began, as Concepcion, my concierge, had recommended, with Retiro Park. There, I took long walks, overwhelmed by the heat, before breaking off the main path to better admire the Crystal Palace. This discovery was doubtless surprising only for me, but when I found the glass and metal structure in the middle of the park, I felt like Snow White stepping into the dwarves’ house on the edge of the woods. The first time, from far away, I was drawn in by the reflections of the setting sun on the windows. After that, I made the place my own. I learned that the building had been constructed in 1887 as part of an exposition dedicated to colonial power in the Philippines. It served as a greenhouse, housing palm trees, giant ferns, orchids. It must have been humid and excruciatingly hot inside. At the time, boats floated around it on the little lake, and nearby huts sheltered the Igarot people. I had come upon a photograph of the men and women, dressed in the European style, men wearing suits, ties, and hats and women in long skirts, blouses, and scarves or mantillas. The exposition opened on June 30 and closed on October 30, 1897. It was a scorching season in Madrid. These men and women must have been dying from the heat. Unless it’s equally hot in the Philippines? In Madrid, older people still go out in tweed jackets and heavy skirts, even in the month of August, so perhaps it’s possible to get used to anything. I abruptly realized I wouldn’t know how to find the Philippines on a globe. Press clippings from the time conjure, in a scandalized tone, “savage parties” in the middle of the Retiro, citing Filipino cockfights and even sacrificial dances.

I sat down near the Palace, in the shade of some trees, and I thought about these men and women, transported like merchandise from so far away, recreating, in one of the biggest European capitals of the end of the nineteenth-century, some semblance of home. I could see them standing around an arena built with a few slats of wood, proudly carrying the rooster they had raised and tended, and securing a long, curved, sharp blade to its left leg before tossing it into battle. I imagined the young Spanish women in frilly dresses, protected under their umbrellas, as men in top hats offered an arm to walk along the lake where water buffalos approached. And then I saw the Louisiana cypress growing out of the basin, like the bayous in the American movies of my youth. There was Kim Basinger and her long Madonna hair sinking into the swamp. There was Martha, my best friend, huddled on the low velvet sofa in the living room. There was my brother, sitting on the floor, his back to us, his long legs stretched out. The memories and time periods muddled together.

Time flowed in slow motion. It had been years since I’d taken a break from work. Inaction weighed me down. My fingers twitched and itched. I made sketches, rough outlines, never finished. And then my obsession with Zurbarán returned. I invented strategies to divert my mind, like a visit, which someone had recommended, to the chapel of San Antonio de la Florida. The charmless, out-of-the-way location failed to prepare me for the magnificent frescoes painted by Goya. I stood for hours, head tilted up, neck aching, trying to capture the scene in its entirety while also taking in each of the little vignettes that composed it. The cupola was filled with crowds of common people and some of the bourgeoisie, and the lower arches held a host of cherubs and female angels with a beauty and elegance Zurbarán could not have denied. It was gorgeous, luminous, and at the same time too profuse for me. The multitude of details made me dizzy.

After I left the little church, around 3 p.m., I sat down in a cider shop next door. I ordered half a chicken and a pitcher of cider. It was spare and simple, everything I loved about Spain. A warm wind swept the terrace. Despite the large boulevard that ran beside the restaurant, there were very few cars. It was probably siesta time for those trapped in the city. Time became liquid, and I was tempted to let myself slip down into the sweet torpor. But the heat, the accent of the servers smoking cigarettes on their break, the earthenware jug on my table, the black coffee, the ice cubes in the cup I’d just been given—all of it—pulled me back to Zurbarán.

The following day, I hurried to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation. I ran through the vast, nearly empty halls, my footsteps echoing. I found her on the third floor, Saint Casilda, hung on a lurid peach-orange wall. Even so, she was one of the painter’s most splendid saints, with her flamboyant dress, its prodigious luxury, her delicate face and fine, white hands. She seemed to stare at me as if she’d just been stopped in her tracks. No call to heaven, as in so many other religious paintings, but instead, a face-to-face with the viewer. I stood captivated, still, and little by little, my breathing lightened, my chest relaxed. The painting was like a drug, and I had gotten my fix.