

Monet & Oscar

The Essence of Light

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Joe Byrd

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Monet & Oscar

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Linda who spent
thirty years on this journey with me.

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Chapter 1: Monet meets Oscar

Oscar Bonhomme's palms sweated as he crept from the warm kitchen filled with the spice-laden aroma of frying sausage mixed with the smell of aromatic, dark coffee into Monet's yellow dining room.

He'd used what little money he had to purchase new work clothes for his first day on the job. He twisted his still-stiff brown woolen cap between his sweating fingers as he glanced at his reflection in the picture glass to see if his pale skin betrayed his months in the military hospital. Did his slight frame and frail stature look well enough for rigorous gardening work? No one would believe he was once tanned, muscular, and robust. Did his prematurely greying hair and the red circles around his eyes reveal the trials he had endured at the front? Although thirty-four, he felt and looked much older.

Oscar summoned his courage pulled from somewhere deep inside himself as he did when climbing out of the trenches and facing the enemy. "*Bonjour, Monsieur Monet.*"

No movement. The newspaper Monet held did not lower. The

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first salvo had fallen short.

He fired off another. “*Bonjour, Monsieur Monet.*”

Still no response. Second salvo, off-target.

Perhaps Monet was hard of hearing. Oscar added more powder and fired the third shot as he shouted, “*Bonjour, Monsieur Monet.*”

The paper lowered to reveal piercing black eyes and a long white beard stained yellow with nicotine. Monet resembled the newspaper photos Oscar had seen of him—short, stocky, and with an intense gaze that seemed to miss nothing around him. His hands with translucent skin and heavily veined looked muscular and tanned, befitting a painter who mainly worked outdoors.

Monet stared at Oscar as if trying to remember who was this invader of his dining room and disturber of his early morning coffee. He wore an English herringbone wool suit buttoned at the neck, with just an inch of white ruffled shirt cuffs showing at the sleeves.

At last, he spoke. “Who are you?”

He sounded irritated.

Oscar drew in his breath and squared his shoulders to make himself look the part before responding with, “I’m your new gardener, *Monsieur.*”

Monet frowned. “I don’t remember you. Who hired you? Why should I hire a gardener in the middle of the winter?”

Oscar stammered as he gathered enough breath to reply. “You... You did, *Monsieur.* Yesterday. At least, that’s what I was told.”

He gripped his newspaper tighter, shook his head, and frowned. “So, what are you doing in here? This isn’t the garden.”

“*Madame Blanche* asked me to meet you here before dawn to carry your paintings for you.”

“Humph!”

And with that, Monet raised the paper again. Oscar remained standing in the doorway, unsure whether to stay or go.

Oscar stood twisting and untwisting his cap and wondering. Will he dismiss me, fall asleep, or will we start our day together? Could this cranky old man be his father? Probably not. But he might know him.

Since it was his first day on this new job, he remained to see what would happen next.

He looked around the room after one, two, three, four, five minutes with no response. Yellow was the theme color. Even the chairs

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and light fixtures were Provence yellow, as his mother called it. Monet seemed obsessed with the color yellow and eating by the looks of the dining room with its multiple sets of dishes and an abundance of silverware.

The odd prints that hung on the walls disturbed him. They were most unusual and not yellow. He saw dozens of them depicting an assortment of Japanese people in native costumes through scenes of Japan. They reminded him of photos his Japanese friends in San Francisco had shown him. The prints featured plants and animals that he didn't recognize.

Oscar scratched his head and thought, why would one of the world's most famous Impressionist painters have these Japanese prints on his walls instead of his art or that of his colleagues?

Lying in the hospital, he had dreamed of what he would do when he was released. He never imagined he would work in one of the most famous gardens in France. This job was the start of his new life; he was excited and frightened to be here.

Curiosity was getting the better of him as he walked around the long table, examining the prints. Each one seemed more colorful and stranger than the one before, and someone had labeled everyone with the artist's name. He made a note to ask *Monsieur* Monet about the prints. They must have been significant to him if they were hanging in his dining room. Undoubtedly, he would have dictated the decoration of this space, the essential room for entertaining.

Finally, Monet's hand emerged to crush out his cigarette in his overflowing ashtray. He lowered his paper, rose from his chair, and shuffled to the door.

"Are you coming?" he threw over his shoulder.

Caught off-guard while still staring at the prints, Oscar felt he was a puppy following its master and hurried through the door after him, down the steps to the garden, past the cart, and into the darkened studio.

"Put these in the cart and follow me."

The paintings looked to be in various completion stages, and Oscar assembled them back-to-back so as not to smudge the fresh paint. Later, he'd need to add wooden partitions between them to keep them safe. Equal measures of fright and honor washed over him as he quickly managed this chore and set off behind Monet in the pre-dawn.

Once outside, his inquiry about where they were going received no response—Monet lived up to his storied reputation as a reluctant

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speaker. Oscar acknowledged his role was to do obey commands and keep silent.

After some minutes struggling with the loaded cart down the garden pathway, up a hill, across railroad tracks, down an embankment, and across a bridge, he stopped beside Monet, standing next to the water lily pond. Oscar was sweating and exhausted.

Monet chose the first canvas of the day. It proved to be large and awkward to place on the easel that Oscar set up under the umbrella used to shield Monet from the sun or rain. He settled on his stool and prepared his palette with paints, squeezing first one tube then another. Monet allowed no distractions. Speaking was a distraction.

Oscar's lungs burned from the exertion, his breath short and choppy. His arms and legs hadn't worked so hard since he'd left the front. It would take a lot of gardening to get his body back into the shape it was in when he worked for his mom at Golden Gate Park.

He stepped back to take in the scene Monet was painting. The pond covered several acres, encompassed by trees, flowers, and shrubs. They'd crossed over a Japanese-style bridge covered with bare wisteria branches. It was still winter, and the famed water lilies were waiting for the season when they would again cover the water's pea-green surface.

But that was not what Monet was painting. Instead, he captured the fractured light on the water's surface and the rays filtering into the depths beneath them. No ground, no sky—just the water and the willows interwoven in patterns of colors and shapes. He looked to be painting the essence of the light that moved on the surface of the pond.

It was not the typical garden scene Oscar had studied in landscape design classes at college. The lily pond represented a living canvas upon which the sun painted a constantly developing picture, just, he supposed, as Monet had designed it. His Japanese gardener friends would say it felt reminiscent of a Japanese garden, but this one held far more prolific planting. Monet had covered every inch with stocks and petals of exotic and familiar domestic plants.

As the sun changed positions, so did the subtleties of light on the water. When the light changed, so did the colors. And so did Monet, who switched to another painting location.

“Let's move down the path. Follow me.”

“*Oui, Monsieur.*” Caught up in the scene, he had nearly missed Monet's command to move on. “I'll pack up and be right there.”

He carefully removed the canvas from the easel so as not to

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smudge the wet paint, placed it back in the cart, and secured it for the brief journey around the pond with the easel, stool, and umbrella. Once he'd arrived at the new spot, he repeated the set-up routine, and Monet was once again ready to continue with a different canvas.

This time, Oscar watched the creation process more closely, so he didn't miss the time to change locations. He observed every detail of the painting to understand how light affected the scene Monet was painting.

He set ten canvases up in ten different locations over the morning. After several tedious hours, it was time to pack up for the journey back to the studio. The light at noon proved too harsh for the effects Monet desired. After unpacking the cart, the time came for him to begin the job he believed Monet had hired him to do.

Monet led him into the *Grande Allée* of trellises, down to the bottom of the garden. The trellises supported pink roses intertwined in their metal arches. He explained how he wanted the rose canes trimmed. Oscar shook his head in annoyance, if not disbelief—as if he hadn't done such a menial task before. Then he realized Monet had no idea what his new gardener knew or didn't know. He was used to working for a perfectionist, his mother, after all. Monet couldn't be any more exacting than she was.

Clearing the trellises of dead rose blossoms, diseased leaves, and dead canes took all afternoon, and he did not finish. Usually, he didn't trim climbing rose canes, but Monet knew best how he wanted things done. Oscar was ready to head back to the room he'd booked in a local boarding house. His arrangement with Madame Blanche, Monet's daughter-in-law, was he would work ten to twelve hours a day but have evenings and weekends free to do as he pleased. This would give him time to research the Impressionist painters his mother had met in the south of France. According to her, one of them was his father. That's the most she would tell him.

But first, he took some lathing and rigged a frame that would hold ten paintings so they wouldn't touch when he next hauled them over the hill to the lily pond. He hoped his boss would appreciate his ingenuity.

Oscar was exhausted from the hours of work as he passed by the large studio door. He heard a voice calling to him from inside.

“Hey, boy. Come here.”

Oscar felt trapped. What did Monet want now? The man had barely spoken to him all day. Had he done something wrong? He

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reluctantly followed the sound of Monet's voice into his cavernous studio as his hands began to sweat again.

The view inside the newly built studio was stunning. Two-story windows flooded the space with soft northern light. The size of the 6' x 14' canvases mounted on rollers before the artist dwarfed the 4'x3' paintings Oscar had carted around all day. Being in the master's presence was like reporting to the principal or his company's commander.

"The paintings I did today were studies for these." Monet stretched out his arms to encompass the most enormous paintings Oscar had ever seen. "Come sit on the couch, so I can get to know you."

Monsieur Monet, who'd barely spoken a dozen words to him all day, now wanted to get to know him. He shook his head, hoping this wouldn't become a habit—just another chapter in a strange, scary day. With luck, he might learn something about his employer. Perhaps his father was someone Monet knew.

"Tell me your full name and where you're from," Monet said as he handed Oscar what he explained was a glass of *Calvados*, the local apple brandy.

Oscar, embarrassed, brushed the dirt from his hands on his pants, accepted the glass, and took a sip before answering. The color was deep amber, the taste a cross between rotten apples and kerosene. He could barely speak as the liquid fire burned a path down his throat. "My... my name is Oscar Bonhomme. I was born in Antibes and raised in California. My mother's family is from Lyon."

Monet paused, raised his eyelids, and then glanced at him sideways as he asked about his father.

"Not a part of my life. He left my mother before I was born," was all Oscar could bring himself to utter.

Monet lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curl up toward the disappearing ceiling before commenting. "Oscar is a good name. It's my first name. I used it growing up before switching to my middle name, Claude, when I began painting. Tell me about your life growing up in California."

Oscar couldn't believe that the most famous painter in the world, Monet, who hadn't so much as acknowledged his existence all day, wanted to know about his life. The incredulity made him blink a few times.

"There's not much to tell. My mother raised me on her own

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with help from her friends since we had no family around. She was a landscape designer and gardener for some mansions in and around San Francisco. I followed her into that field. We worked together with Japanese gardeners creating the Golden Gate Park. I learned more from them than from many of my college professors.”

“I don’t like Americans,” Monet responded dismissively.

Oscar smiled. “I can’t say I blame you, *Monsieur*. Americans can be pushy.” Monet responded with another sideways glance and took a long sip of his *Calvados*.

The artist then launched into a brief history of his garden and lily pond, how he had bought the house in 1886 and added the land for the lily pond in 1890. He had designed the garden as his canvas featuring colors and designs that would blend well in his paintings. He selected colors to match his palette and enjoyed mixing white flowers with colored ones to achieve a shimmer in the scenes as he painted.

As someone who loved beautiful gardens, Oscar was deeply touched by Monet’s description. He saw how much his garden meant to him.

“That made the garden so intriguing and first inspired me to spend more time here,” he explained. “I want to learn how to adapt such an approach for my future clients.” He felt privileged to be able to work in the master’s living canvas.

Monet stared at him with a frown darkening his face. “So, you wish to copy my garden designs in California, do you?”

Oscar gulped. He’d overstepped his bounds. “Not right away. I have a lot to learn before I can even consider that. Would you mind telling me how you got started in painting?”

He hoped he’d handled that challenge well enough.

“Not now. Maybe later.”

With that, Monet drained his glass, crushed out his cigarette, and slowly rose from the couch, giving Oscar his cue to leave.

Oscar was being dismissed, and he tried to end the conversation on a friendly note. “I’d like to return and study the paintings in your dining room sometime.”

“They’re not paintings. They’re Japanese woodblock prints. Perhaps.”

It seemed that would be the only commitment his employer would make. But Oscar didn’t mind—he would accept it for the time being. It was not a good ending for his first day at his new job. He knew that, somehow, the Japanese prints had a role to play in his quest.

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It was too early for him to tell what that role would be.

On the way back to his room with its bed, one chair, and a dresser, he wondered if Monet would ever speak about his family and his struggles to become a successful painter. He felt compelled to learn more about Monet's life and career since he was the painter his mother admired the most.

Oscar lay down on his bed, exhausted from the first hard day's work he had done since entering the hospital months ago. Compared to Monet, he was having difficulty catching his breath as he pushed the cart of paintings up the hill and over the tracks to the lily pond. Monet seemed in great shape for a man of around eighty years old. He had survived the first workday despite offending his boss. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit his pillow.

Mom, I can't believe I'm here working for one of the greatest artists and gardeners in the world. If only you could see me now. All those times you talked about returning to France and showing me the grand gardens. We were planning the trip together when the war happened. I traveled to France to fight for our home country and was wounded. You died alone before I could return to you. I miss you so much. I'll make you proud of me, promise I'll find my father. I wish you'd told me more about him. Then I'd know where to look. All I know is he painted in the south. In the south. In the south...