

## Hortense

Hortense got up early, as she always did. She put on her blue patterned dress and apron and went downstairs to the kitchen - full of pots and pans, strings of garlic and racks of vegetables. She set the water on the stove ready to boil the eggs. Every morning she did the same thing.

It was May and her hens were laying well. She picked a couple of eggs out of the terracotta dish and put them in the bubbling water.

Hortense had been Claude Dupont's housekeeper for as long as she could remember. She lived in a small room in the attic of the house that Claude had inherited from his father. It was a large property at the edge of Haut Bouton, the village in which Hortense had grown up, and which she had never left. The house was fading a bit – the grey paint was peeling on the shutters. The wisteria wound around the windows.

As the steam rose from the boiling eggs she thought about the day ahead. Once breakfast was done and cleared up, she'd be back in the studio. The studio, as Claude liked to call it, was a converted lean-to on the south side of the house. Not much more than a shed really, but it was where she had learned her craft.

She loved it all: the smell of the rags and brushes, the sun on the low stone wall and the lizards flicking away. She could see the vegetable garden beyond and her chickens pottering about in the orchard, always fussing with something or another. But it was the paint that held her attention. Hortense never failed to be inspired by colour. Orange is her favourite. 'Orange as the setting sun, sinking slowly in the sea'. Not that they can see the sea from here. But she likes the sound of it. Orange and blue together, and then a deep dark green. Just the thought of it thrills her. How to capture the light glinting on the water, the twisty trunks of the Provencal pines, the dappled shade and a red roofed house in the distance? That was her task for the day.

As usual, Claude had done a quick sketch whilst out with his fancy easel: the perfect image of the artist. But it was she who did the work in this little stone shed. And sometimes, she thought, it was she who had all the fun as well.

*Later that afternoon..*

Hortense put the finishing touches to the *Lac des Pins* - and sat for a while, gazing at the familiar view. She was in no rush. There was plenty of time to think about what to make for Claude's dinner. Perhaps a pissaladière, or maybe fish?

On a whim, she went to the back of the shed and pulled one of Claude's blank canvases out from the stack. He wouldn't miss this little one. Hortense found a stub of yellow lake oil pastel and began to draw. She had never done this before. Perhaps she could start from scratch. Perhaps she could make a picture of her own. Why not give it a go? She settled on her subject: the valley below, the small house on the left, and the outcrop of white stone behind. Soon she was lost in the work. Tomorrow she would turn this into a painting and no one would know the difference.

*The following week...*

Hortense was busy with the rough brown paper, packing up the pictures: the *Lac des Pins* and her own work, '*Le Chalet Sud* among them, ready for Claude's next trip to Paris. He goes three or maybe four times a year, usually for just a few days. Hortense has no idea what Claude does with all the paintings she has completed and she doesn't mind either.

She always has the next one to do, and always the colours to enjoy: lead white, emerald green, viridian, cobalt blue, and the orange mixture of vermillion and Indian yellow. She likes the routine: the paint, the chickens, and the old black cat rubbing round her stocky legs.

*Something like a year later...*

The butcher always wraps the sausages in newspaper. As she peels the slightly damp layers away, something catches Hortense's eye. "Record Price paid for a Claude Dupont". She reads on. Someone called Lillian Cutler, an art collector from New York has bought one of Dupont's latest paintings *Le Chalet Sud* at auction for a record price. According to the auction house report, Dupont is fast becoming one of the leading artists of his generation. There is no doubt about it, this is his finest work to date.

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#### *New York*

Lilian Cutler knew from the moment she read the auctioneer's description. She wanted, no, she *needed* to own *Le Chalet Sud*. She *adored* Dupont's work and according to the auction house, this was an absolute gem: Dupont at the top of his game. Lillian had been left her fortune, her mansion and her art collection by her late uncle. At first it was a burden, but that was years ago. Since then she had become a familiar figure in the New York art scene, known as a connoisseur of French painting. She was famed for her impeccable taste and she knew it. Her infrequent purchases always caused a stir. As the saying goes, "Prices rise when Cutler buys."

She put the auction catalogue down on the onyx coffee table. She could just imagine it, a small perfectly formed Dupont alongside the Cezanne in the lounge. They would make the ideal pair. Lillian instructed her agent in Paris. "Get me *Le Chalet Sud*, money no object."

For the next sixteen years *Le Chalet Sud* graced the Cutler residence, known to all but seen by no one except Lillian and her small staff. When Lillian died, quite suddenly, her entire collection was put up for sale.

Steven Findlay's heart missed a beat when he heard the news. Steven was an expert in analyzing art works. He knew everything there was to know about pigments and particles of paint. He used the latest polarizing microscopes and carefully chosen apochromatic objectives to reveal layers of colour and the drawing beneath. He knew about the detail of the brush stroke, the thickness of the paint and its impact on translucency and tone. He was *the* authority on Dupont and he had been commissioned to examine much of the artists' oeuvre, now held in galleries around the world. Steven was a physicist, an historian and a detective and he loved his job. No one had been able to study *Le Chalet Sud*, Dupont's most famous work, before. Maybe now was his chance. A few days later, he got a call from the Philadelphia

Institute of Modern Art. The trustees were thinking of buying *Le Chalet Sud*, but they needed some advice before going ahead with such a huge investment. Could he perhaps take a look?

#### *Haut Bouton, Provence*

Hortense was in the kitchen chopping vegetables. Thank goodness she no longer had to climb all those stairs down from the attic. She thinks back. It must be sixteen or maybe seventeen years since she had shown Claude the notice she'd spotted in the newspaper, wrapped around the sausages.

"Look" she had said, "Look, you've done very well with *Le Chalet Sud*". Claude had just shrugged. "That's the art market for you Hortense. You never know what's going to happen next." After a long pause he had continued: "I know it's a trek to the attic and back and you've said your knees have been troubling you lately. We don't use the drawing room at the front of the house very often, so if you *did* want to do a bit more sketching yourself you could move in there and of course just let me know if there are any materials you might need."

So that's what happened. Hortense took up Claude's offer. She moved into the spacious drawing room with the big French doors opening out on to the garden.

Little else has changed. The chickens scratch around in the orchard. Hortense spends her days in the studio or out sketching on her own. Now in charge of the whole process, she produces one or two Duponts a month. Claude does less and less. He makes fewer trips to Paris and more frequent visits to his somellier.

They had a telephone installed a few years ago, and one day it rang. Claude answered. It was a long-distance call from Philadelphia. Steven Findlay. Claude was getting a bit deaf but that's what it sounded like. Could this Steven come to visit? Well why not Claude thought, we don't get many visitors these days.

Hortense prepared the table for lunch outside. She set out the plates, the best cutlery and the wine glasses. "A crisp white for our guest", Claude had said, and so it was. A flinty dry Chablis from the cellar. Claude led Steven out on to the terrace. It was lovely. The wisteria had grown and grown, but the view was the same. Across the valley you could still see *Le Chalet Sud*, though the trees had grown up a bit in the foreground. "Do take a seat" said Claude.

Steven was entranced. There it was, the view that he had studied so carefully but that he had never seen before. He pulled himself together. No time for emotion, he was here to discuss an important matter of detail. Claude poured the wine and Hortense brought out the hors d'oeuvres: stuffed olives and a little charcuterie.

The sun beat down on the stone wall and the lizards flicked away. By the time they got to the end of the third course, the conversation was flowing but Steven had still not managed to bring up the reason for his visit. He must do that soon.

"Claude, there is something I'd like to ask. It's about *Le Chalet Sud*. I've studied many of your works over the years, but this one is different. The polarizing microscope shows that the sketch is in yellow lake oil pastel, not charcoal. I can see that it is a painting of your view, right in front of me, but I was wondering, why the pastel?"

Hortense was clearing the plates away when Claude interrupted. "Would you join us for a moment?" Hortense pulled up a chair and sat herself down. "Steven, this is Hortense, my housekeeper. Steven has a question about *Le Chalet Sud*".

Steven was puzzled. What would Claude's housekeeper know? He carried on anyway. "Yes, you see my analysis shows traces of oil pastel, not charcoal so I was wondering...."

Hortense gazed across the valley towards *Le Chalet Sud*. "That's right, it was yellow lake. It was a late spring afternoon, it might have been May. There was no charcoal but there was a bit of pastel. I think we've still got some in the studio"

Steven could not contain his curiosity. Would the traces of yellow lake match? Would he be able to see some Duponts in progress? Would he discover how Claude layered the paint to such effect? He just had to ask. "The studio" he said. "Do you think I could have a quick peek in the studio, I'd love to see where you work".

Claude replied: "Yes, of course. Hortense can show you round".

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Hortense lifted the heavy latch and pushed open the studio door. The light streamed in across the uneven stone floor. There was her old wicker chair and her painting apron and the big wooden table with her brushes and her colours. Vermillion, veridian and ultramarine. She savoured the names as well as the oily textures and the smell.

Steven had to duck his head as he came in. He looked around. The so-called studio was just a shed. There were cobwebs on the beams and gaps in the slates above. A stack of canvases lay propped up against the back wall. He turned to Hortense. "May I take a look?". Hortense said: "Yes, of course, that's the next batch ready to go to Paris."

Steven went over to the pile and picked one out. He carried it carefully to the light. It was a stunning view of stony outcrops and below them, a lake catching the last rays of the evening sun. No doubt about it, it was a Dupont. He would know one anywhere. There were the angled brush strokes, the careful layering of paint, and the colour, always the colour. Hortense watched him.

"I think there are some other views from the same spot." She pulled out an old cardboard box. "Yes, here are a few more. This is from last winter. And here is another one with the quarry. I'll clear these things away to make some space." Hortense pushed some of her rags aside.

Steven considered the painting in front of him. The water shimmered. The light played across the hard landscape. The dark shadows accentuated the delicate rosy glow on the limestone. From his microscopic analysis, Stephen knew that Dupont always used a layer of lead white and ultramarine, but that was not enough to capture the slightly ruffled surface of the lake. How had he done that? The technique was amazing.

Hortense was rummaging through the jam jars in which she kept old bits of crayon that might come in handy one day. "Here is a piece" she said. "Here is some of that yellow lake pastel you were asking about."

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Claude was still at the table on the terrace when they returned. He looked up. "Did you find what you were looking for? I hope Hortense was able to answer all your questions." Steven replied. "Yes, it was very informative, thank you so much".

Before Steven could say any more Claude stood up and shook him by the hand. "I like to have a bit of a siesta these days and it's time for my afternoon nap. Hortense can show you the way out. Very nice to meet you. Very nice indeed."

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Steven opened the door of the hire car. When he got back to the lab he could match the fragments of yellow lake with the stub that Hortense had given him and that would be that. It was exactly the evidence he needed to show, beyond doubt, that *Le Chalet Sud* was an authentic Dupont. He reached for his spectacles. Damn. Not in his jacket pocket. Steven searched around. Not in the glove compartment. Not in the little brown holdall. He must have taken them off in the studio. Never mind, he could just pop back and fetch them: no need to trouble Claude again. Steven walked around the side of the house.

The studio door was open. To his surprise Hortense was there, mixing what looked like vermillion and Indian yellow. She was so absorbed that she didn't notice him. He watched as she began to apply the paint in distinctive, angled brush strokes.

Steven's entire career had been built on his knowledge of Dupont. But as he stood in the doorway it began to dawn on him that there were no Duponts. He took another look around the shed. It was now obvious that everything had been painted by Hortense. That's why she knew about *Le Chalet Sud* and the yellow lake pastel. That's why she had such a detailed knowledge of colour. This was not Dupont's studio, it was hers.

He tapped on the door and Hortense looked up. "Here they are" she said, handing him his spectacles.

Steven's flight back to New York was booked for the next day. What was he going to do? It would be the sensation of the century: Dupont's entire output painted by his housekeeper! Fortunes had already been spent. "Prices rise when Cutler buys" or so the saying goes. The value of Dupont's work had escalated after the record price paid for *Le Chalet Sud*, but what if the truth came out? Steven knew enough about the art world to know that the market would collapse. And then what? Dupont's – no, Steven corrected himself – Hortense's paintings would not be seen and admired: all that talent, the vibrant colours, the effect of light on water, it would all go to waste. How could he, Steven Findlay, let that happen?

*Le Chalet Sud* was a fine work of art. Yes, it had been painted by Dupont's housekeeper, but did that really matter? The traces of yellow lake would match the old stub of pastel from the studio. That would be proof enough. Steven made up his mind.

He knew the system, and he knew his part in it. He *would* recommend that the Philadelphia Institute of Modern Art buy Dupont's most famous work. Steven lay back on the hotel bed and laughed to himself. Hortense would carry on producing art for the world to enjoy, Claude's reputation would remain intact and Steven's expertise would always be in demand.