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Over the Rhône and into the Night: Just Be Graceful

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When Bernice, a tall 85-year-old woman with green eyes and thick grey hair, was diagnosed with metastatic cancer, she insisted that her oncologist tell her how long she had to live. The doctor replied that a person in her condition would ordinarily live about eight months, but because she was so healthy she might have more than a year. “That’s my death sentence,” she told me in a gravely voice that was tinged with a Philadelphia accent. “I am very cheerful and happy, but at the back of my mind I know that I’m going to be very sick.” In the time she had left, she resolved to spend more time with her children, eleven grandchildren, and friends. She was also pursuing a new pastime, painting, which she discovered during her illness. “You know,” she told me. “I blame it on the chemo. It changed my brain; somehow, I became creative and I never was. So, I guess from bad comes good.”

Intrigued by this, I brought her images of paintings as part of a study I was conducting under the



auspices of the Drexel University College of Medicine, in which I used well-known and contemporary works of art to generate first-person narratives from those at the end of their lives. Of the six paintings offered to her, Bernice chose *Starry Night over the Rhône* by Vincent van Gogh. “I’ve heard of *Starry Night*,” she told me. “But I don’t think I’d ever seen it before now. There is so much reflection of light!”

Knowing that Bernice was Jewish and that our interview was one week before Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, I asked her if there was any relationship between the holiday and her choice of Van Gogh’s painting. “Yes,” she chuckled, and then explained that light and candle lighting are historically and ritually meaningful in Jewish practice. “Just think of Shabbat candles on Friday evenings, or lighting a memorial candle on the anniversary of a loved one’s death.”

Bernice quietly gazed at the painting, her index finger moving along the surface from one detail to another.

“Are there any shapes that you find interesting?” I asked her.

“Well, the couple. It looks like two women, maybe an older and a younger one. The stars are so sparkly. It’s very soothing to me.” She paused. “It’s someone helping an older person. That’s me, now. *Old*. It’s hard to believe; I still think I’m eighteen.”

Throughout the hour that we talked, Bernice often referred to the soothing nature of the stars in the painting. “The ethereal means a lot to me be-

cause I think that's where I'll be going. I dreamt I was in a tunnel and my husband was standing at the end of the tunnel. To me the lights are like the tunnel."

"If you made up a story about that painting, what would it be?"

"I would write: don't be fearful. Someone's waiting for you up there. Just try to be graceful. My husband was so stoic. He didn't complain. He was amazing. But of course, I was with him, he's not with me."

"And that's the difference?"

"That's the difference."

"What do you think happens next? To the people in the painting?"

"The older woman dies." Bernice laughed. "There comes a time to go. We can't fight it. I have a nice poetry book, and one of the lines is, 'do not go gently into that good night.' I don't agree with that. I wanna go gently."

"If God was standing behind you and listening to you, what would God put into this painting that isn't there?"

"He'd show me flying up."

"Just going up right into the sky?"

"Into the stars," she concluded.

As our hour together ended, I asked Bernice whether viewing the painting was helpful in any way. She responded that looking at and talking about *Starry Night over the Rhône* gave her strength. "Yes," she told me. "It confirmed that I do believe in an afterlife, and that believing in the afterlife will help me to die."

The Starry Night, Vincent van Gogh (1888)



Note: Vincent Van Gogh: The Starry Night, in 1888 (FR 1975 19)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, usufruct donation of Mr and Mrs Robert
Kahn-Sriber, in memory of Mr and Mrs Fernand Moch in 1975.

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