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[PLATE 1]

“Boy with Cherries”

1858, 25 3/4 x 21 1/2

Red: hat, fruit, face and hands. Reds in the brown background and coat. Reds in the green; the wall that is green and the lettuce leaves. Manet’s studio was dark. He was well liked by men and women, for different reasons, though he was taciturn and apt to take a razor to any canvas that bore a likeness he did not admire. Here is a boy with cherries and yet only the smallest areas of canvas are illuminated.

Brother and Sister drive out of a small northern California town. Yellow dust rises around their rental car. The sky is pale blue. The median strip of brown grass is on fire; a controlled burn. The road is surrounded by fields of cherry trees.

“They’re selling cherries on the side of the road,” Brother says.

“They do that this time of year.”

“We have to buy some.”

Sister slows the car and pulls over. Brother gets out. The heat from the brush fire is intense. The smoke smells good though, clean like dirt.

Behind a low stone wall that’s crumbled at either end is a chubby, pale boy. He wears what looks like a bellhop’s hat. In front of him, on the stone wall the boy uses

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as a vendor's booth, are cherries, deep red and golden yellow cherries, displayed on broad and wilted lettuce leaves.

Brother asks, "How much for a bag of cherries?"

The boy speaks, mouths the price, and Brother can't tell for a moment if the boy is a boy or a midget; then he's sure he's a boy. Brother buys the cherries and gets back in the car with Sister.

With the bag of cherries between Brother's feet, Brother says, "Do you remember when Mom took us to meet up with Dad in the hotel in New York?"

"Um —"

"The one near the Chrysler Building?"

"I remember the Chrysler Building." She smiles. "I remember the new dress I wore."

"Do you remember the room we were in?"

"Not really." Sister sneaks a cherry from the bag and pops it into her mouth. The cherry is hot from the sun.

"It was adjacent to Mom and Dad's room. Remember? They used to do that. We would share a room and they would share a room, with a door that connected the two rooms."

"They did that all the time."

"They kept it unlocked in case we got scared. As always, you fell asleep right away. The room was dark and quiet—the ceiling was really low. I did fall asleep, eventually. But I had a bad dream and woke up. Really confused, like you are when you wake up in a strange place.

"I got out of bed and went straight to the door separating our rooms. I opened it and on the bed in the other room were a man and a woman who looked like our parents in all respects except that they were small.

"They got off the bed—they kind of bounced off, you know, like when you're a kid and the bed's just enormous."

"Sure."

"They asked if I was okay but I was dumbstruck, I couldn't remember why I was there and all I wanted to know was what had happened to Mom and Dad.

"The small man who looked like Dad pointed down to a spot on the bed, where I could see he had a collection of marbles. He picked up one marble—it was red—and another that was also red. His face was small, his body was small, his fingers were small. He knocked the marbles together—click, click—and the small woman who looked like our mother said, 'You see? There's no reason to be upset.' They smiled and smiled and finally I backed out of the room, back into our room. I got deep under the covers and I was glad you were there. Eventually I fell asleep."

"It was a dream?"

"Nope."

"Did you go into the wrong room?"

"I guess, something like that."

Sister gives Brother a sideways glance. "Did that really happen, Brother?"

"Sure it did."

Brother points to the side of the road. "Is that another cherry seller?"

Sister doesn't bother to look. "Out here, Brother, they're nothing special."