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The Rothko

A One-Act Comedy by

Nicholas Thurkettle

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The Rothko
by Nicholas Thurkettle

CHARACTERS

SECURITY GUARD: *Male, husky-sized. His world is not complicated. Any age.*

THE MAN: *Temperamental and unpolished but deceptively-clever. Keeps people off-balance. 30's-40's.*

DIRECTOR: *Haughty and self-assured. Used to impressing people and dealing with impressive people. Any age/gender.*

CURATOR: *Impassioned but earnest, believes in trying to achieve a meeting of the minds with anyone. Any age/gender.*

SETTING

A small office in a museum

TIME

Day

The Rothko
by Nicholas Thurkettle

SCENE

AT RISE: *A pool of light comes up on the SECURITY GUARD, standing to the side of the darkened main set. HE addresses the AUDIENCE directly and forcefully.*

SECURITY GUARD

The author of this play wishes to make clear that he does not condone, excuse, endorse, or participate in acts of violence against works of art. However, given that no one can seem to agree on what constitutes art, where the hell does that leave us?

HE moves to the back of the stage and the LIGHTS SHIFT to reveal a small administrative office; a couple of chairs, a lightly-decorated desk, etc.

The GUARD re-enters, pushing THE MAN in front of him. THE MAN is moody but cooperative. He sits in a plastic chair. For a moment they wait in silence.

THE MAN

Hey, uh...

SECURITY GUARD

What?

THE MAN

What time did you get here today?

SECURITY GUARD

Excuse me?

THE MAN

For your shift. When did you start work?

SECURITY GUARD

9:30.

THE MAN

Ah...to walk around before the place opens, huh?

SECURITY GUARD

Yeah.

THE MAN

So, uh, did you get lunch yet?

SECURITY GUARD

(Beat)

No.

THE MAN

Jeez. I'm sorry about that.

The SECURITY GUARD doesn't respond verbally, just a shrug and a "Humph".

The LIGHTS DROP ALMOST TO BLACK, shift subtly in color and then LIGHTS UP again. The SECURITY GUARD stands in a corner, tuned out of the talk, while the DIRECTOR is standing on the other side of the desk from THE MAN. The tone throughout their dialogue never drops below a certain threshold of hostility and confrontation.

DIRECTOR

Are you a lunatic?

THE MAN

I don't think so.

DIRECTOR

Is this a statement? Are you political?

THE MAN

I vote.

DIRECTOR

Oh, you think this is all funny, don't you?

THE MAN

No, I really don't.

DIRECTOR

You don't think it's funny?

THE MAN

When was the last time you kicked something because you thought it was funny?

DIRECTOR

I've never kicked anything!

THE MAN

I bet you've kicked a soccer ball.

DIRECTOR

That's not what I mean! Do you have any idea what that was you kicked?

THE MAN

A painting.

DIRECTOR

A painting...it was a Rothko!

THE MAN

I know that!

DIRECTOR

(Sarcastic)

You do...you knew it was a Rothko.

THE MAN

Sure. Who wouldn't know a Rothko when they saw one?

DIRECTOR

Anyone who knew a Rothko when they saw one wouldn't kick a hole in it!

THE MAN

And you're so sure of that?

DIRECTOR

What's Rothko's first name?

THE MAN
Mark.

DIRECTOR
And what school is he categorized in?

THE MAN
Abstract.

DIRECTOR
Abstract expressionism.

THE MAN
Not according to him it wasn't.

DIRECTOR
That is irrelevant! How do you know about Rothko anyway?

THE MAN
I like art.

DIRECTOR
You...like art.

THE MAN
No, I go to museums because I hate art.

DIRECTOR
(Sighs)
Probably a Dadaist.

THE MAN
(Springs from his chair)
You take that back right now!

DIRECTOR
How else do you explain it?

THE MAN
Why am I supposed to explain it?

DIRECTOR
Because that painting has an insured value of 30 million dollars and now it has your dirty footprint on it and a massive tear!

THE MAN

I wouldn't call it massive.

DIRECTOR

How can you...!?

THE MAN

I mean, the wall was right behind it so my foot didn't even get all the way through. And it was high. My leg doesn't stretch like it used to.

DIRECTOR

I am not a violent person, but...

THE MAN

You can't talk me into believing that.

DIRECTOR

Stop! Stop stop stop stop stop! (*Beat*) Mark Rothko was one of the seminal post-war American painters. One of the most triumphant masters of color the world has ever known. He found radical vibrations, harmonies, and moods in color, pushed abstract work into realms that had never been imagined before.

THE MAN

Yeah, and when he killed himself, he OD'd on pills AND slashed his wrists.

DIRECTOR

Why would you say something that horrible?

THE MAN

Just to show you we agree.

DIRECTOR

Agree on what?

THE MAN

That he wasn't a lazy man.

DIRECTOR

You are a barbarian!

THE MAN

I'm trying very hard to answer your questions.

DIRECTOR

You haven't answered anything!

THE MAN

Actually, as I think on it, you haven't even asked many questions. Real ones, I mean. I liked the trivia questions about Rothko, though. I'm good at trivia. Ask me to name three Impressionists whose names started with "T".

DIRECTOR

Be quiet.

THE MAN

One of them is Twachtman. Twachtman! I love that name.

DIRECTOR

You're going to pay for this!

THE MAN

How much did you say it was worth?

DIRECTOR

30 million dollars!

THE MAN

I don't have that.

DIRECTOR

It's insured.

THE MAN

Ah, well, no problem then.

DIRECTOR

Yes, a problem! Even after it is repaired, its value will decrease!

THE MAN

According to who?

DIRECTOR

What do you mean?

THE MAN

I mean, paintings are one thing, but getting people to agree on a price for something – that's an art, right there. Have you ever gone to a rug store? Those guys are like Beethovens.

DIRECTOR

Just tell me... Why, why, why did you do it?!

THE MAN

(Frustration rising)

I looked at it and that's what I wanted to do!

DIRECTOR

Well you're not allowed!

THE MAN

Not allowed?!

DIRECTOR

No! You're not allowed to kick paintings!

THE MAN

That's a rule? It's written down somewhere? Don't kick the paintings?

DIRECTOR

(Flustered)

Don't...damage...deface...don't take flash pictures...don't even get too close to them and breathe your spitty breath on them!

THE MAN

So this is a big problem?

DIRECTOR

What?

THE MAN

I mean, do you have the don't-kick-paintings rule because there are hordes of people out there who would otherwise kick paintings if you hadn't written that down?

DIRECTOR

In a world where you exist, I believe so.

THE MAN

Well let me ask you, did you own that painting?

DIRECTOR

It was on loan from a private collector.

THE MAN

If that guy kicked it, would that be allowed? I mean, I assume you'd check his I.D. first. Hey – I just thought of something! You could sell tickets to that. It would be a big deal – you could do a reception afterwards, for after he kicked it, I mean.

DIRECTOR
What kind of diseased...?

THE MAN
You could serve champagne.

DIRECTOR
You are going to jail!

THE MAN
Is this a thing they do jail for?

DIRECTOR
It has to be. I don't want to live in a world where someone like you gets to roam free.

THE MAN
That is a very serious statement.

DIRECTOR
No, no, you're right, we should all just do what we feel. Whatever deranged, destructive impulse is inside us, it has to be valid, right? Right, well, fine, I'll just go out and set fire to a newsstand, I'll go...sexually violate a cow.

THE MAN
You have a very perverted imagination.

DIRECTOR
You have no grounds to criticize.

THE MAN
Do you really mean to tell me the only thing holding you back from screwing a cow is that you think it's not okay to do what we feel? I'm worried about you roaming free now.

DIRECTOR
I wouldn't. I wouldn't. I'm a human being! I demonstrate –restraint, aspiration, civilization. I have...bearing and self-discipline, perspective...I have perspective.

THE MAN
Huh.

DIRECTOR
...Huh?

THE MAN
That's really interesting.

...Interesting?!

DIRECTOR

Yeah. So...uh...uh...

THE MAN

What?!

DIRECTOR

What do you do when you look at the painting?

THE MAN

The Rothko?

DIRECTOR

Yeah the Rothko!

THE MAN

I appreciate it!

DIRECTOR

How do you do that?

THE MAN

By not kicking it!

DIRECTOR

Hey, I'm asking a serious question.

THE MAN

You aren't serious. There's nothing serious about you!

DIRECTOR

Fine, if you won't answer that...what do you call that color?

THE MAN

What color?

DIRECTOR

The color on the bottom half – you know, it's like those two big blobs of color with that mucky border around it. What do you call the bottom color?

DIRECTOR

(Cold fury)

That color – that glorious, raw color that is now smeared with the dirt of your Philistine boot – is a savage incarnadine, a brilliant and intense crossbreed of sanguine and oxblood perfected after no less than five previous attempts.

THE MAN

Wow. I just thought it was a fucked-up red.

DIRECTOR

Did you?

THE MAN

Yeah – I thought to myself “Jesus, that is one fucked-up red.” And then I kicked it.

The DIRECTOR lets rip with a savage yell and seems to charge towards THE MAN, but a BLACKOUT stops the action.

When the LIGHTS FADE BACK UP, THE MAN is alone with the SECURITY GUARD again.

THE MAN

Hey – uh, what’s the weirdest thing you’ve seen someone do with a painting?

SECURITY GUARD

Besides you?

THE MAN

Yeah.

SECURITY GUARD

Mostly, people just lean in too close. Or they’ll want to draw on it or something. This one guy, I must have tackled him and thrown him out five different times. Every time, he said that he was the one who painted the painting in the first place, so he was allowed to change it. But it was a different painter’s work every time! Talk about your lousy liars.

THE MAN

Heh – yeah.

SECURITY GUARD

Lately you get some people posing with the paintings.

THE MAN

Posing?

SECURITY GUARD

Yeah, like they'll go find some Renaissance portrait with some Duke or something sitting and looking all serious, and their friend will take a picture of them standing next to it and going like...

HE gives a cheesy grin and a thumbs-up.

THE MAN

Hey, that's pretty funny.

SECURITY GUARD

(Chuckling)

Yeah. But there was this one time...

THE MAN

Yeah?

SECURITY GUARD

I was making the rounds near closing time. And I come up to a gallery entrance and I see there's this girl alone in there. She's an art student, she's got her sketchpad and she's doing a study of the piece in front of her. Sometimes the students kind of lose track of time, and you have to run 'em out.

THE MAN

Oh yeah, I get that.

SECURITY GUARD

But it ain't time yet and she's not making trouble so I hang back. I don't want to break her mood, you know? But then she stands up, and she sets down her pad, and then she looks over her shoulder, and then I get this feeling like I should hide so I take a step back and she doesn't see me.

THE MAN

And she did something? You saw her do something?

SECURITY GUARD

Yeah.

THE MAN

Well what already?!

SECURITY GUARD

She stepped towards the painting, and then, she just...pulled the shoulder things off her dress. I only saw from the back, but she wasn't wearing a bra and she...well she...

THE MAN

Wait – she flashed the painting?

SECURITY GUARD

She showed it her breasts.

THE MAN

Whoah...I mean...WHOAH...

SECURITY GUARD

Yeah.

THE MAN

Lucky painting.

SECURITY GUARD

Damn right.

The LIGHTS DARKEN again, and the SECURITY GUARD resumes his place at the back of the room. When LIGHTS UP, THE MAN now sits with the CURATOR.

Their conversation is a noticeable and instant contrast from the tone of the dialogue with the DIRECTOR. It is calm, empathetic, and always a little sad.

THE MAN

(Chuckling)

Wait, say that word again.

CURATOR

Rissverklebung.

THE MAN

That's incredible. That's an incredible word. Riss...what?

CURATOR

Rissverklebung.

THE MAN

Rissverklebung. And that's what they're going to do to it? The Rothko?

CURATOR

Yes. After it's cleaned.

THE MAN

So how does it work?

CURATOR

We will have the entire canvas analyzed for stretching and warping. The placement, color, and quality of paint on every thread affected by the tear will be mapped on a microscopic level, and, if necessary, removed.

THE MAN

Removed? You'll take the paint off the painting?

CURATOR

Yes.

THE MAN

And...what? You can't put the same paint back on, can you? So you're...you're re-painting it?

CURATOR

It's restoration. I don't think you'd meet a restorer who would want to call it painting. It would be...sacrilege, I think is the closest word.

THE MAN

What then?

CURATOR

Are you actually interested in this?

THE MAN

Yeah.

CURATOR

(Sigh)

Using humidity, trimming, or additional material, each thread will be restored to its proper length and reconnected with a specially-formulated paste.

THE MAN

You glue it.

CURATOR

In short, yes. We glue it. If we do it well, no one would ever know from looking that anything was changed.

THE MAN

Huh. You know what that is?

CURATOR

No. What is it?

THE MAN

That's love. I mean – that's an incredible amount of love. So you'll be able to do that to this one...you know...make it okay?

CURATOR

I hope so. I really do.

THE MAN

That'd be nice. If you could do that. The other one...the angry one...

CURATOR

The Museum Director.

THE MAN

Yeah. They said that the painting would go down in value. Is that true?

CURATOR

I try to avoid the business side of things; but my understanding is that's true.

THE MAN

Why would...? I mean, it's still the painting, and if it's like you say, you'd need a genius with a microscope to know it was any different. So why would it be worth less?

CURATOR

People would know something had happened to it.

THE MAN

But why would they care? I mean – most guys aren't marrying virgins these days, right?

CURATOR

I would like you to be less distasteful.

THE MAN

Uh...wow. That cuts right through it. Okay, yeah, no problem. So this, uh...the not re-painting...

CURATOR

Restoration.

THE MAN

Yeah, that. It happens on a lot of paintings, right? I mean, the years go by, there's got to be, like, oils, and fading.

CURATOR

Everything ages.

THE MAN

And since anything old was around before photographs, you can't point to anything to say this is the exact shade it should be...

CURATOR

It's an incredibly complicated discipline...and...it still takes a certain degree of faith.

THE MAN

What I mean is – a guy...or a girl...it could be either, I just say a guy because that's how I talk...but a guy paints a painting. That's one guy's work. But then, people like you, they love that painting so much, that they put all this work into it. Not just to protect it; but to make it last for centuries looking like it did right out of the studio. All that work, I guess it just feels like...if it looks the same even after a guy like me comes along...why wouldn't it be worth more? Why wouldn't the work you did add to that value?

CURATOR

Did you think you were making it more valuable? (*Beat, off his silence*) Did you even know it could be fixed when you kicked it?

THE MAN

No. I didn't think about it.

CURATOR

How could you do that?

THE MAN

What if he wanted me to? Rothko, I mean.

CURATOR

I think you should ask that question again, and listen to yourself say it.

THE MAN

...uh, okay. What...if...he...wanted... (*Beat*) Oh. Yeah, okay, I get it. You know that Director kept calling me crazy, but I think that was the first really crazy thing I've said.

CURATOR

I'm glad you see.

THE MAN

What I mean is – what if he wasn't hoping I would kick it – but he was kind of hoping somebody would eventually kick it?

CURATOR

How can you think that's less crazy than your first question?

THE MAN

You know how artists are. How can anyone think that everyone who ever painted a painting wanted the same thing for it? Every museum I go to, it's these bland walls, these nice soft lights. And the quiet. Quieter than graveyards! Does every artist dream of their work ending up exactly here?

CURATOR

Rothko thought his works should be viewed under as little light as possible.

THE MAN

And do you do that?

CURATOR

No.

THE MAN

Well, see? Huh...

CURATOR

What?

THE MAN

Maybe he thought that if you saw it in full light, somebody might kick it. Jeez, you could really go round and round with this stuff.

CURATOR

I'm sorry, I don't know how else to say this – but you've caused this to be the worst day of my life.

THE MAN

But it can be undone. Honestly, I wish every piece of art could be made so that everything anyone wanted to do to it could be undone. You could scribble on it, lick it, hug it. I'd hug a Monet. I'd fart on a Pollack. Just out of curiosity. I'd lay it on the floor first, like he did when he was painting it. I'd love it if everybody who ever looked at a painting could have that chance.

CURATOR

It's the feeling of what we might do. That sweet agony. That's why we preserve it. So every possible person who wants to know can have it.

THE MAN

And I...? Ah, geez, now I do feel bad.

CURATOR

It hurts me, when one of these works gets hurt, do you understand? People say it's like seeing your kid scrape its knee, but it's not that. It's like every child's knee around the world got scraped all at once. I feel like something that proves we're more than just animals with thumbs got wounded; and it was my fault.

THE MAN

I got nothing against it. Rothko's one of my favorites.

CURATOR

It doesn't matter – don't you see it doesn't matter?

THE MAN

You're right. Damn it. DAMN IT. *(Beat)* You don't think it's his fault? I mean, for coming up with such a fucked-up red?

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes