


A
DROP
OF RED

DANA
VAN DYNE

Most stolen art is never returned.

Some is never forgotten.

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Cover Art: Alan Robbins

ONE

“My mother warned me to
avoid things colored red.”

Claes Oldenburg

There she was, lying on the table.

She was staring at the ceiling through eyes that saw nothing.

Barely recognizable as a person, she was nude but heatless, bluish, and brutally treated. The people standing around her were suitably somber. It was February 2014, Valentine’s Day to be exact, and none of them really wanted to be there. They had families or lovers or dinners waiting. The fading daylight outside the window was tinting the buildings amber, a reminder that the holiday was slipping away.

Besides, they had already reached their conclusions about who and what she was. And what happened to her. But they were stuck there waiting for one last person to arrive and weigh in on the matter. It was a matter of courtesy. The director standing right next to her began to tap his finger on the table in a parody of impatience. The sound bounced slightly like a tiny drum in a toy band. When they thought they heard someone at the door, they all looked up with hope. Not just for solving the mystery of the woman on the table, but for getting home before the day grew too old to enjoy.

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A green Ford Falcon parked on the street was the only car to be seen.

No one noticing it would have dared to park nearby. In that time, 1980, and in that place, Buenos Aires, a green Falcon was the last car anyone wanted anything to do with. A yellow streetlight above it both pinpointed the car and gave it a sickly pallor. This made it even more notable and not in a good way. The Avenida del Libertador was a big street, an important street, but at 3:00 in the morning, after the curfew, it was empty. With no one strolling and no other cars around, the engine of the Falcon rumbling was the only sound echoing.

On the other side of the wide boulevard sat the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, the tall terra cotta columns a familiar sight for tourists. The museum had been closed for Christmas Eve and by now the two inept guards were no doubt asleep. The light rain falling on Buenos Aires that night turned the scene into one of those cheap city paintings they sold at the *mercados*. Of the three men sitting in the car, only the one in the back seat noticed this. He was the only one with an attentive eye; the other two were just thugs, waiting unplugged, unaware. Then, at a signal from the driver, they all pulled ski masks over their heads, stuck flashlights into their belts, and made sure that their pistols were secure, so that no one accidentally shot anyone else in the foot.

Looking around to see that everyone was ready, the man in the driver’s seat turned off the engine, which rattled to a stop like a cough. He put his hand on the handle to open the door, but stopped to mutter a short prayer to *San Nicolás*. Not Saint Nicholas, the precursor to Santa, but to the patron saint of thieves.

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Standing outside the room at the closed wooden door, Mo Kline paused with her fist in the air. Would knocking seem too wimpy? Barging in might make a better impression, she thought, and so she grabbed the knob and pushed. But the heavy door swung open too easily and she wound up flouncing into the room. Everyone inside jumped. There was an odd silence as no one walked over to greet her and so she gingerly closed the door behind her and waited for something else to happen. Under rueful stares, she tried to casually drop her coat and bag on a tapestry-covered chair but that too somehow became a comic bit as everything slid to the floor.

First impressions mattered, as she knew. But there was no need to concern herself about it. She was noticeable even if they had not been waiting for her. She was shapely and trim and the suit she was wearing enhanced this. She had long curly black hair that framed her face softly and contrasted her pale skin. She had the face of a Hollywood icon in the old studio days. She looked right. The fact that she was wearing large Gucci sunglasses indoors may have registered as eccentric or fashionable, but it did not matter in the end. Her look did not translate into a warming reception in that room because she was also an intruder, an invader, an outsider to a tight club.

After a very long pause, a nice-looking fellow in a brown jacket specked with a kind of soft ochre they used in the French cave paintings – she noticed that immediately – came over to her. He was tall and had a trim beard that made him look distinguished even though he was too young for that. Being polite or perhaps only taking pity, he extended his hand. It felt warm even in the chilly room.

“Ms Kline?” he asked. “I’m Wells.”

“I’m well too,” she said, mishearing and taking his hand.

Mo had devised a way of shaking with her right hand and placing her left on top to enhance her hello. It was a ploy for someone who was wary of new people. But she did not need it to impress Dash Wells. He had looked her up online and liked both the headshot and the resume. Now in person, she was even more impressive. Beautiful but shy, the perfect combination. He placed his other hand over her second hand like a hand sandwich to double up on the greeting.

“Well, there she is,” he said, pointing to the table in the middle of the room around which the others stood. “Want to take a look?”

Mo took off her sunglasses and walked over to the table to get a good long look at the woman lying on it. It was hard enough for anyone to make out the figure, given its condition. In fact, she did not even see the body at first. Just the colors. This was the catch in her talent. Colors were so dramatic and physical to her that she could easily miss more obvious things...like details and objects. The woman in this case.

“What do you think of her?” Wells asked, trying to be coy.

“Her?” Mo replied.

As she did not look up when she said this, Wells took it to be a sign of her concentration. This was true. But she also had not seen the woman as a woman yet. It was only through Wells’ use of that pronoun that the subject revealed herself to Mo. Then she could see that this was surely a naked woman, though you had to search to pick her out from the frenzy of colors. The hair was a splatter of shapes, the eyes as though gashed by

a maniac, the lips a stucco of orange, one nipple a smear of purple, and the skin pigment all wrong. The victim of some kind of explosion in a paint factory perhaps.

“Want a magnifier?” Wells asked.

“Nope. I’m okay with these,” Mo said, finally looking at him and pointing to her own eyes.

“You sure are,” he said, but given the tense atmosphere in the room, his compliment went unnoticed.

“So anyone know the time of death?” Mo quipped, smiling slightly.

It was a joke about the solemn mood but no one got it. And no one smiled back. Least of all, the woman on the table, who was not actually dead in any case.

...

Fernando Perón, sitting in the back seat of the Falcon, felt jittery but also excited. He was new to the team, still getting used to his secret service ID card and the authority it gave to the baby-faced man he knew himself to be. He had only joined the force one month ago and at the age of 22 was probably the youngest member. In fact, he was the least likely person he knew to have joined in the first place. He had just finished his studies at the University of Buenos Aires and had been thinking of teaching art history.

The only problem with that was his name.

At his age, or lack of it, Perón barely knew why his name was a problem. But it was. Juan Perón had been the president of Argentina three different times in three decades. He was loved and admired and hated and feared...a champion of the people or a fascist dictator, depending upon the politics of the moment. When he died, his second wife, Isabel, took over but her term ended in 1976 with a military coup. The junta, headed by General Jorge Videla, took control of the country and began the so-called National Reorganization Process, a dirty war against all opponents. Thousands of political enemies were killed or “disappeared,” kidnapped and executed without trial or public record. Among them was anyone associated with the past, especially with Juan Perón or any of his followers, the so-called *Peronistas*.

And so, although he was not related in any way and had no political ideas in his head at all, the name alone put him at great risk. Because of that, his uncle Marco de Solis, an inspector for the local police, had pulled a string or two. De Solis got his nephew into the secret service, the *Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado* or SIDE. Not because he believed in it, but simply because he loved his sister and this was the best way to protect her and her son.

Perón had no idea what to expect of work in the secret service but ski masks and flashlights and pistols in the middle of the night were not on his list. He had never even held a firearm until he joined the force. He was more interested in girls than in guns and the pistol felt heavy and strange in his pocket.

“You are ready?” asked the man in the front seat, having finished his short prayer.

He turned around and his piercing eyes seemed to be stabbing Perón through his mask. He looked terrifying and Perón wondered if he did too. He looked into the rear view mirror to see for himself but only caught a glimpse of two frightened eyes surrounded by black wool.

“*Pobrecillo!*” said the other man in the front seat.

The word meant “poor little thing.” But in the slang of the streets it cut deeper: scared shitless little lamb.

“Sí!” said the one in the driver’s seat.

“Let’s go already!” Perón insisted, although he actually felt like bleating.

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Outside the room, New York was turning dank; but it was unusually swank within. The examination was taking place in a conference room, not a lab, with rich mahogany paneling rather than institutional walls and a Veronese glass chandelier instead of fluorescents. The table was cherry wood with a walnut inlay, not a slab or a gurney. In fact, it was only the lingering question of whether or not an actual crime had been committed that turned the room so cold. On another day, they would have had lunch there with neat linen napkins and shiny china and chatter about art or wine.

“Well?” said a stern woman with a blonde chignon standing next to Mo and studying her face like a fortuneteller. Or a rival.

This was Dr. Nicole Champion, resident expert, who did not share the spotlight gracefully. She was the kind of woman who thought of expertise as superiority. Having already given her professional opinion – which was not opinion to her but fact – she was not very cordial about a second one.

Mo Kline tried to ignore her.

As the center of attention in this room of strangers, Mo knew that she was creating her own portrait, the one they would remember. The one she wanted them to remember. What she needed most at that moment was to be taken seriously. That is the reason she had dressed so carefully: the power suit, an Armani in deep blue, single breasted with one button, serious but not somber; the white shirt with a large collar, casual but stylish; the hem just below the knee, chic but not provocative. Dark gray Jimmy Choo shoes with three-inch heels to seem tallish but not teetering. No necklace; too formal. Hair brushed softly but not too casually. Was all this working? she wondered. No way to tell. So instead she focused on the job at hand. As she bent over the figure lying on the table to get a closer look, she seemed to be scanning it with lasers for eyes, inspecting the body in question, looking for clues.

Comically, the others bent over too. And when she straightened up, they did too. Bend, straighten, bend. Like a yoga class at an autopsy. When she stood up one more time, they all did. But at that point, she seemed to have reached her conclusion.

“So what is your verdict?” Champion asked snidely.

Mo had one for sure. But she paused here for maximum impact. She knew the answer would ruffle some very fussy feathers. Yet it was clear to her that someone was indeed guilty of a crime.

Champion squinted at her like a pirate, daring Mo to question her professional judgment.

Mo dared.

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Under the sprinkling rain and the chrome haze of the streetlights, the three men left the car and walked slowly and calmly across the wide street to the museum. The tall one in

the group had a slight limp but still set the pace for the others. They knew there was no need to rush or lock the car or even avoid being seen. No one in their right mind would dare to challenge them. Not anyone who hoped to live.

The men walked around to the side of building and headed to the rear of the museum, which was covered with scaffolding. The construction of the new wing had been going on for weeks. They slipped into the temporary structure of steel braces and wooden planks and walked up the stairs to higher and higher levels, just as the workers had done days before to resurface the exterior wall. At the fourth level they found the window they had already jimmied from the inside and easily opened it and climbed in.

An alarm went off very softly, almost inaudibly, but it still startled Perón. The other two men seemed unfazed by it. Perón pointed to the small box with a blinking red light but the tall man who was the leader of the team waved it aside. Instead, he clicked on his flashlight and headed for one of the galleries. Perón followed and noticed a large surveillance camera along the way. He pointed that out too but again he was the only one who seemed to think it mattered.

It was spooky in the dark and still as a tomb yet Perón felt an odd calm as he flicked his light around the artwork on the walls. Not because of their covert mission, which only made him feel guilty. His serenity was due to the fact that they were in the National Museum of Fine Arts, of all places. He loved to go there but hated the crowds. Now he was there almost alone with the art he admired enough to study and visit. And without even paying an entrance fee. How perfect!

“*Despertate!*” said the tall man, whose name was Navarro, jabbing him out of his dream.

They had reached their destination and Perón put his light on the sign above the entrance to a large gallery. The sign read: *Sala Mercedes Santamarina*. Perón was familiar with this; he had visited this exhibition himself, many times. It was a collection of Impressionist paintings, the largest in the country, donated to the museum by Mercedes Santamarina, a well-known Buenos Aires socialite. She had been collecting paintings for years, mostly in Paris, and had donated them to the museum under the condition that they be kept together as a collection.

The idea of now seeing the works alone by flashlight gave him a thrill. No crowds, no distractions. He stepped into the gallery like a holy place. There were many rooms there filled with work but he could only see them in the narrow beam of his flashlight. The creamy walls looked sour that way but the artwork did not. Perón focused his beam on the first work, a small drawing by Degas. Seen like that, so close and so private, he thought of the artist’s fingers actually making those marks and turning blue from the pastel. He thought how nice it must be to turn a blank piece of paper into a picture everyone could see.

Then he heard the jarring sound of glass shattering.

...

“She’s a fake,” Mo announced and waited for the blowback.

But her judgment was met with total silence.

“A fake?” Dash Wells repeated, just to stir up the dead air.

“Yes. A fake.”

“And that is your *expert* assessment?” Campion hissed.

This was not a question but more of a slap. Mo picked up on the tone but decided to ignore it.

“Yes,” she said bluntly. “This painting is a fake.”

“Based on what?” said one of the other men attending the examination.

He was wearing a striped suit that was buttoned at the waist around a bulging belly, but the tie was hanging outside of it like a dry tongue, giving him a thirsty look.

“Oh this is Dr. Hammerman,” Wells said. “The director of the museum. Sorry, I should have...”

But Hammerman flicked away the apology and waited for his answer. Mo pointed vaguely to some of the splotches throughout the painting and said: “That red is wrong.”

Campion snorted, a very unattractive sound, and shook her head. She looked around for support from the others for the idea that this intruder was a know-nothing fraud but no one else had as big a stake in the result and therefore no one else agreed. Instead, they all looked more closely at the painting one more time, hoping for enough information to take a side. That was hard. Here was an almost abstract painting, a fury of brushstrokes and wild colors, with the slightest hint of a nude female form and face in the midst. It was an oil by Willem de Kooning, one of the most famous artists of the 20th century. But was this object lying on the table before them the actual painting the museum had acquired? Or was this just a copy, a forgery? There did not seem to be enough clues to render a decision.

At least not until this moment.

“How do you know the red is wrong?” asked a young woman with a British accent who worked as a conservator. “It looks just like the archival photo we have.”

As she said this, she took out a leatherette folder with some documents in it and an 8X10 high-quality photographic print of the same painting. She held the photo out under the light of the chandelier next to the painting for comparison. Except for the difference in size and sheen, they did indeed look identical.

“This photograph was made from the original?” Mo asked.

“Yes,” Wells said.

“You took it?”

“No, I was just hired. This photo was taken back when the museum first acquired the painting. Not the same high resolution we can get now. But...”

“Very professional,” Campion interjected, to bolster her case.

Mo held the photo next to the painting and immediately saw the consistency.

“You’re right,” she said, “they are the same...”

Campion beamed broadly at that.

“...which means,” Mo went on, “that the color on the photo is wrong too.”

“Impossible,” Campion insisted and she glared at Wells.

She had hired him to photograph the museum’s newest acquisitions when his predecessor quit and she expected loyalty from that decision.

“Well...” Wells admitted, “not exactly impossible. The colors in the photo could be slightly different from the original painting. It’s a photo after all.”

“It’s an *archival* photo,” Hammerman said. “It is supposed to be a legal record. A perfect copy.”

“True, but...”

Wells went on to explain how complex the word color was. There was the color of light, the color of pigment, the color that exists only in the cells of the brain. All different. Paint in a painting reflecting a color was one thing. The way that light transformed photo emulsion on paper was something else. Colors in a digital print were different again. And how the brain transformed any of that into electrical impulses and an understanding of color was something else again. Photons, pigment, toners, neurons. The word “color” was simple, everyone knew what it meant. But color itself was a quagmire.

“What the hell does all that have to do with this?” Campion snapped.

“I’m just saying,” Wells explained, “it’s more complicated than you might think.”

“No it isn’t. We acquired a de Kooning painting. The photographer took a photo of the painting. Here’s the photo. We lent the painting to Dallas and just got it back. Here’s the painting. They look the same. End of story.”

“Sorry,” Mo said, and she really meant that.

Unlike Campion, she did not like challenging people. Or proving herself right. Except that, in this case, she was.

“Sorry?”

“I mean that what you say may be true but still...this painting is a fake.”

“And you are convinced of this...because?”

“The red. The red is wrong.”

...

Perón turned to find Navarro who, having smashed a glass cover, was now cutting a Cezanne drawing out of the mat it was mounted on. He was using an old utility knife and the sight of a masked intruder smashing and slashing at a delicate drawing by Cezanne seemed ugly to Perón.

He thought of bolting but he knew that was impossible. No one crossed the secret service, certainly not one of their own. They would kill him as easily as anyone else who defied the junta. Navarro glared at Perón through the eyeholes and nodded his head towards one of the works on the wall by way of saying “get to work.” Perón had no choice and began smashing glass and slashing mats himself. But to be more civil about it, he slipped off his own mask so as not to frighten the dancers and posers they were busy kidnapping.

The third man on the team had carried a portfolio case with him into the building and that puzzled Perón on the way in. But now it made sense. Only those pieces that could fit into the case were to be taken. Larger works, even if they seemed more important to Perón, more impressive to his undergraduate eye, were left behind.

It was eerily quiet there, the alarm too faint to hear; the only sound was that of smashing glass and wooden frames clattering onto the floor. And Perón’s heart beating out a thumping rhythm.

Then in one fateful moment, Perón noticed a painting on the wall just outside the gallery. It was a work by Renoir, a small study of a girl with a red bow in her hair. It was not part of the Santamarina collection. He knew the painting well. He had stopped in front of it many times and always felt seduced by it. The girl in it was beautiful to his eye, light and innocent, pale in color, smaller than life. So different from the daily drama under the junta, especially for someone working for it. It reminded him of a girl he knew

back in *educación primaria* who sat tantalizingly near him. What was her name? Doloria?

A quick glance told him that the other two men were cutting their last pieces and finishing up. Perón saw in that moment a chance to possess for all time a fleeting feeling. Of rapture? Of desire? Of purity? It was hard to say. But without thinking it through, he seized the moment and grabbed the piece and broke the frame. He did not cut it from its wooden stretchers but instead, with some difficulty, he stuffed the painting under his jacket. It was less than a foot tall and, still mounted, caused a weird boxy outline under the material. Luckily he had worn a long jacket because he thought it would make him look scarier and this helped to hide it. In the frenzy of the moment he hoped no one would notice.

Yet he was so nervous about being seen that he did not pay attention to the cut on his finger from the broken frame that left telltale marks for some clever snoop...a small smear of red at the bottom of the painting and on some of the wood from the frame. Since the blood seemed to match the colors in the painting itself, Perón did not spot it. He simply tossed the broken frame onto the floor where all the others were piling up and continued inside the gallery.

It was a snap decision with no rationale, he knew, but who would care? Perhaps he would even return the painting after a few days of living with it. An act with no consequence, he thought.

One of many mistaken ideas that made sense at the time.

...

"The red," Campion repeated. "What red?"

"All of it," Mo explained. "It's the red tone throughout the whole painting. There's been a color shift. It is too fleeting...like a warm wind that presses against you, then turns chillier as it passes on."

This of course made no sense to anyone else and Mo knew that it would not. But there was no point in trying to explain how she *felt* colors, the way a normal person might feel slithery on the skin or twangs inside the body. This painting may have been one single degree too cold from the way she recalled the original but that was enough difference to make a difference to her. To her sensation of the color. Trying to communicate that would only alienate the others and make her seem like an alien. She tried another approach.

"The orange is too red, the blue is too purple, the yellow too orange," Mo said. "Everything has a kind of colder red in it."

"But they match," Campion said, swinging her hand between the photo and the painting.

"Yes. I'm talking about both the painting and the photo. The red is different in both of them...as compared to the original de Kooning you had hanging here in the museum two years ago."

"Would someone explain to me what we are saying here?" Hammerman asked.

As an administrator, not a connoisseur, he was a big picture man and not a fan of the finer points.

"She is saying that neither of these match the original artwork," Wells said.

“How can you possibly know what the red in the original painting looked like?”
Campion shot back.

“I saw the original here at the museum,” Mo said, “when it was on display. Two years ago.”

That was too much for Campion, an expert in 20th century art and particularly in the work of de Kooning. She knew him not as a man but as an artist, a force, a drunk. She knew his work, the attitude of his composition, the temperament of his palette, the aura of his paint. The intensity of his brush. Because he often gave his paintings away without signing them, there was frequently no record of them. So it was the studied eye and the doctoral brain that identified his work. Knowledge, in other words, not some memory trick. The wrong red? Ridiculous!

“Let me try to understand this,” Campion said, folding her arms as a rebuttal. “You saw the original painting once two years ago here in the museum in an exhibit and you remember the exact coloring of the red in it – mixed in with all the other colors, by the way – well enough to know that our archival photo and this sample on the table do not match the original.”

“I told you,” said Wells, coming to Mo’s defense. “This is what she does. It’s some weird kind of color memory thing she has.”

He twiddled his fingers in front of his own eyes to demo the effect. It only made him look loopy. Campion turned to the director with a look that said bullshit in face muscles but the message was not getting through.

“We loaned the original to Dallas after that exhibit,” Hammerman said. “If what you’re saying is true, they gave us back this perfect copy.”

“Not quite perfect,” Mo corrected.

“No,” Wells said. “That’s not it.”

“No?”

“This photo was archived here, wasn’t it? In which case, it never left this building. And the painting matches it. If this painting is a fake, then whoever made it must have used the photo as a resource, not the original piece of art. That’s why they are identical. It looks like this fake was made by someone here at the museum who was looking at the photo.”

As he said this, Wells lifted the painting up off the table and rested it on its base so that the woman in the image now seemed to be standing there among them posing defiantly. The painting was a dither of brushstrokes and colors and the woman in question barely recognizable in the middle through a rough depiction of hair, eyes, mouth, breasts, torso, legs in a gaudy blast of shapes. But upright like that, she suddenly seemed alive and well, and even annoyed about the whole incident. After all, she was supposed to be admired, not analyzed. Hammerman saw her seeing him and frowned.

“So we’re the victims of a fraud,” he said. “You know what this means? This means a major investigation, detectives, lawyers, lawsuits. It is a pain in the butt is what it is. Is that what we’re saying, Ms Kline?”

“I’m not saying that,” Mo said, to confused looks all around.

“You’re not? What then?”

“I am simply telling you what I see. This painting here,” she said plainly as she drummed the woman’s belly, “is not the same one you had on display two years ago. The red is wrong. That’s all I’m saying.”

...

The actual heist – if that was even the right word for it – took only about thirty minutes. By the end of that time, the three men had cut sixteen works of art from their mounts or mats and thrown the broken frames on the floor. They paid no attention to the noise they were making or to the mess they created. The faint alarm was silent to them. They knew very well that they were above any law that applied.

As they finished up, the other two thieves pulled off their masks as well. It was too hot in the gallery for them and besides, what was the point? The masks had been more of a costume than a strategy. No one was coming to stop them. They assumed that the area had been liberated, that is, cleared by the police so that the army could operate without interference. Either that or the guards were fast asleep. Even if they appeared on the cameras, no one would dare identify them.

With the portfolio under his arm, the third man led the way back to the window through which they had entered the museum. Perón was surprised to realize that the alarm was still ringing but that no one was responding to it. Now, annoyed by the sound, Navarro smashed the box with his flashlight and the alarm stopped. One by one, the three men climbed back out through the open window. The edge of the wooden mount on the painting Perón had taken got snared by the windowsill and tore his jacket. Still no one noticed. The three of them walked calmly back down the outside scaffolding like masons at the end of a long day. They crossed the street, put the portfolio into the trunk of the green Ford Falcon, and got into the car and closed the doors.

“*Re-fácil*,” said the third man as he struggled to get the engine to start.

“Top of the world, Ma,” said Navarro, quoting an American crime movie.

As the car sped off into the night, a figure emerged from behind some trees in the park across the boulevard from the museum where the car had been parked. It was a shadow in shadow as the three men had approached the car and for that reason, none of them paid attention. But now the shadow came into the yellow streetlight. This was Maria Elimendo, local fortuneteller and mother of three. She had tracked down her wandering cat Lucia near the statue in the Plaza Francia and ended up noticing the car and hiding. She now stood on the sidewalk, a lone figure dressed all in black, holding her black cat, and staring at the Ford going off in the distance.

She shuddered, not from any chill in the air but from the image in her head. It was common then to see tanks parked in front of cafés and soldiers guarding lazy streets but this was different. That car, that color, that model... *El Auto Verde!* Everyone knew what it meant. She would try to erase it from her mind. Come up with a story, an alibi, a lie about that night. She never saw it; never even went out of her house; knew nothing about anything.

It was that or end up as one of the Disappeared, a name in the newspaper with no person to go with it.

The cat snarled.

...

The damage on the way out of the room was hard to avoid.

The victim of the crime, as it happened, was not a painted woman or a painting of a woman or even the artist who painted it. It was a seriously bruised ego. Knowing this, Mo sidestepped Nicole Campion to get to the door in case the woman intended to trip her. Or worse. When she made it out to the hallway and closed the door behind her, Mo breathed a sigh of relief. But she soon felt a hand on her shoulder and turned sharply, ready to punch. It turned out to be Dash Wells smiling.

“That was fun,” he said.

“Was it?”

“Wasn’t it?”

He stood there for a while trying to give himself a reason to continue. Like everyone else in the room, he had seen Mo the moment she made her awkward entrance. But more importantly, he had *noticed* her. Really noticed her. In a room of expert eyes, he noted her curvy shape first, then her shapely legs, then the leggy shoulders, although that made no sense at all. He was smitten. She looked like some Hollywood star from the Golden Age whose name he could not quite recall, in a photograph by George Hurrell. Not just in the face but in the silvery lighting and the lush shadows, the soft play of tone across porcelain skin. Not Greta Garbo, not Loretta Young. Who was it?

“Ms Kline...” he said, by way of stalling.

“It’s Mo,” she said.

“Mo as in Monica? Monique?”

“No. Mo as in Mo.”

“Maureen? Molly?”

“It’s Mosa. Mo for short. And your first name is...”

“Dash,” he said. Then a practiced explanation: “My mom was a fan.”

“Of punctuation?”

“Of mysteries. It’s Dash for Dashiell. You know, Dashiell Hammett?”

He put out his hand again and again she shook it with both of hers. It was the right temperature. Warm like the brown of warm brownies. Cooking is partly about heat, she thought. So is chemistry.

“You sure lived up to your reputation,” he said.

“Do I have one?”

“That’s why I invited you to come,” Dash said. “You were highly recommended.”

“I don’t think Dr. Campion was too keen on my opinion,” Mo understated.

“No matter. If you’re right, you’re right. She’ll have to get keen.”

“What happens next?”

“Lunch tomorrow?”

“I mean with the painting.”

“Oh...they’ll start an inquiry into it. If your theory is right...”

“I don’t have a theory. I just see things.”

“If your seeing is right, someone working here at the museum made the copy from that photo and switched the two paintings when the original came back from the loan to Dallas. Art forgery, pretty cool stuff.”

As they reached the lobby of the museum with the large metal doors looming as an exit, Dash felt time compressing and slipping. He put his hand on her elbow to get her attention. It was not necessary but it was a nice touch.

“There’s something else I wanted to ask you,” he said. “About another project.”

“Oh?”

“There’s a woman who represents a charity, some kind of foundation. She approached me to help verify a small painting in her possession.”

“Verify?”

“I think she wants it assessed. For value.”

“What kind of painting?”

“By Renoir.”

“Why doesn’t she go to Sotheby’s or something?”

“That’s what I asked her. But she’s adamant about having me look at it.”

“I thought you were a photographer.”

“I am but I also own an art gallery in Brooklyn. She seems to be gathering opinions about this painting. Trying to get a consensus.”

“Okay, but what can I do? I’m not an art expert.”

“You out-experted all the experts just now.”

“I just have a good visual memory, that’s all. I remember colors. I feel them. That’s all.”

“A photographic memory.”

“No, it’s more chromesthetic actually.”

“Oh. Well, that’s perfect,” he said without any good reason since he had no idea what she meant.

He did, however, know that he wanted to see her again and handed her a card, which she barely looked at before stuffing it into the pocket of her coat.

Colors push. They penetrate. The lens of the eye, the fluid inside the eyeball, the membrane of the retina; and then the channels of the optic nerve, the cells of the visual cortex, all the way into the fabric of the mind. Mo could sense all that like the universe kneading her. It was not just limited to paintings. Men had colors too. Dash Wells was a rich mix of tans and russets and cyans that was like a back rub and already impossible to ignore.

“I don’t know,” she said, putting on the large sunglasses to cut down the input.

“Tomorrow at noon? I’ll set up the meeting. I’ll even send a car for you,” he said jauntily.

“I’m not the right person for this. I don’t know anything about Renoir.”

You are the perfect person, he thought. But he said nothing. Give her space, she’ll come. He was confident about that. She would not be able to resist using her talent, or so he had heard. Besides, he was not really telling her anything. That was smart because he knew very well that if she knew the truth, she would not just ignore his invitation, she would run in the other direction as fast as possible.

TWO

“I want a red to be sonorous, to sound like a bell;
if it doesn't turn out that way, I add more reds and
other colors until I get it. I am no cleverer than that.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

For reasons Perón was not told, the other two men on the team did not want to bring the paintings to their boss that night. Perhaps it was out of respect for the holiday or maybe something more sinister. Instead they told Perón to keep the portfolio in his small apartment near the Avenida de Mayo.

It was true, he could see, that no one on earth would ever suspect that sixteen works by famous Impressionists – seventeen, if you counted his girl with a bow – would be lying in a leatherette case under his bed in that apartment. He was known in the neighborhood only as a student who liked the girls and lately as someone to avoid due to his connection to the government, whatever that was. His dinky one-room apartment with the leaky sink and the missing floorboard near the front door was the last place anyone would look for such things, if anyone were actually looking.

It was already almost dawn by the time Perón got home. He worried that Señora Baio on the first floor might see him carrying the case and wonder what he was up to at that hour. She was nosy and at one time might have asked him about it. But there was no need for concern now. Perón had not been on the job long enough to realize that simply seeing the green car on the street as they dropped him off would be enough to make her close the shades and forget. Her own husband, a day laborer who went to a single union meeting the month before, had become one of the Disappeared. She learned then to mind her own business.

Perón did not do what he was told, which was to put the stolen pieces under his bed, go to sleep, and wait for his partners to come back the next day. Instead, he opened the case and placed the works rather neatly on the bed and floor of the room, turning it into a stuffed art gallery.

He might have been a government agent by profession now but he was still, at heart, an art history student and here were works by some of the masters right before him. Not in slides on a screen or reproductions in a book but actually in his possession. In his apartment. The bald light bulb that annoyed him with its glare now seemed like a carefully designed illumination and the barren walls a sanctuary for beauty.

Here was *The Call* by Paul Gauguin, and over there *The Road* by Paul Cezanne. And then *Head of Young Girl with a Blue Ribbon* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Other drawings and small paintings lay scattered. All these works had been sliced from their mounts and frames and now had coarse borders, which seemed brutal to Perón. But he had been more careful with *his* Renoir and now he picked the canvas up and examined it carefully.

Alone with her, away from the stern museum lights and the bustle of visitors bumping and talking, Peron could finally take a good long look at the girl with the red bow in her hair. He held her lightly, as though caressing an actual girl, but *una diosa* not some babe off the streets.

She was young, perhaps about ten years old yet she had a knowing face. Her seductive gaze came through dark violet eyes that appeared to look right at him. Straight on but softly, one eye was peeking through a tuft of blond hair as if to hide or perhaps even wink at him. Her hair, a soft mix of yellows and ochres and reds, could have been painted using a cotton brush if there was such a thing. It was thick and full and cascaded down over her shoulders like a warm waterfall. Her nose was pert but the length of it hinted at a more rarified beauty years ahead in time, if paintings could age. Her lips were plump and deep orange. She was smiling ever so slightly and might kiss him in the next moment. Not on his lips but on his cheek, as if to thank him for freeing her from an artsy prison.

She was perfect.

Even the placement of the red bow was just right. A casual knot, nothing ornate. Not too high on her head to seem oh-so-fancy and not low enough to be an afterthought. It was her bow, exactly the way she would wear it, to appear both older than she was and younger than she seemed to be. She was wearing a simple shift of some kind that revealed her shoulders and upper arms and the clear skin under her neck. It was painted coarsely to contrast the innocent maturity of her face. The world behind her was a blur of colors, impressions of a garden at the end of summer. Think swirly brushstrokes for leaves and grass; sponges of dark colors like living shadows.

If she seemed sexy to him, it was only in the way that girls hint at the women they will be someday. Yet she was timeless and because of this, Peron did not feel ashamed of his longing for her. She was lovely and always would be; young forever; seductive for all time, never wavering. So unlike life itself.

Without actually touching the surface, he hovered his finger over her shy but sensual eyes and the red bow in her hair. She seemed ideal to him, too young to be his lover but too old to reject him. Argentina under the military junta was a harsh world, a world of secrets and lies, vicious in its cold efficiency; but there in the silence of his room, with the dark of night just lifting, he could ignore all that and adore the light colors and the gentle strokes of the paint that Renoir himself had made to bring to life a young innocent girl. Fernando Perón sighed as though feeling a first passion for the first time.

...

It was after midnight by the time Mo got back to her apartment in the West Village. Some people were leaving the party next door that she was supposed to attend and she made her excuses. Work, an assignment, a freelance job. No matter; the others were all too drunk to care. In fact, the enigmatic email from Dash Wells about the painting at the museum proved more enticing to her than any party. This would have revealed something about herself had she been paying attention. But these thoughts were interrupted when she got home to find Nabi still up and waiting for her.

“Did you go to the party?” she said to her roommate.

“I did but it was boring boring boring. So I left,” Nabi replied in a liquid British accent with a New Delhi lilt. “In any case, I brought you a gift.”

She gave Mo a small box. Inside of it was a pair of earrings with tiny round red stones. “Garnets? These are beautiful,” Mo said, holding them at her lobes. “But I don’t have anything for you.”

“Of course not. I won them tonight in the grab bag and drops of red are not my thing. But I think they are your thing.”

“Oh well...thanks.”

“*Haippi vailenta insa divasa!*” Nabi said, moving fingers and head like Tamil temple gestures. “May you find love this season.”

For this last statement, she held her finger in the air. Demanding, not wishing. She wanted Mo out of her apartment as soon as possible.

“So how was your...viewing?”

“Interesting. It turned out to be a painting by de Kooning. But it was fake.”

“And the mysterious Mr. Wells? Was he fake too?”

Something in Mo’s expression or skin tone must have told Nabi more than Mo wanted to actually say.

“I see!” Nabi said. “I detect a tall young man elegantly dressed with a trim beard and warm hands.”

Nabhanipa Patel was an actress with a Bollywood face, now starring behind the counter at the local Staples as she waited for another part. To survive in both careers, she made it a habit to study people and make up dramas about them. It was surprising how often she was right.

“What?” Mo said. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I’m reading the book.”

“What book?”

“You. You are an open book. And what’s next with Mr. Wells? A real date, I hope?” she asked.

“He wants me to go to his gallery in Brooklyn to look at another work of art. A Renoir.”

“Come over and see my Renoir,” Nabi mused. “In other words...a date.”

“No, just an opinion.”

“On a date.”

“No, I don’t think so. On the other hand, he knows that I don’t know anything about Renoir. So maybe...”

“I see,” Nabi said to Mo and then, to herself: a *date*.

And maybe a romance, possibly an affair, hopefully a relationship and with any luck, Nabi would have her apartment to herself again.

“I think this Renoir is a pretty lame excuse,” Nabi said. “And thank heavens for that.”

She was probably right, Mo thought, not knowing that the reasons she had in mind were all wrong.

...

At precisely 9:00 am on Christmas morning, Inspector Marco de Solis arrived at the National Museum to respond to a call from the director that there had been a break-in the night before. He had been reluctant to show up but his wife Carmina kindly helped him with his uniform and patted him off to work. This was not the way he intended to spend

the holiday but it was clearly the way he was going to and so de Solis, rotund and sweating, slipped on his cap and adjusted his gun belt to gather himself up before entering the director's office.

"*Señor Director*," he said formally but smiling also.

"Ah! Inspector. At last! We were robbed! The Santamarina collection. All our precious Impressionists!"

De Solis was not dumb but not very high-minded either and had no idea what the director was referring to. De Solis followed him as the director practically raced through the museum to the Santamarina wing. Breathless, they arrived at the gallery where evidence of the crime was clear. The walls were bare where drawings and paintings once hung and only the mounting screws hinted at the missing work. Broken frames, mounts, and shards of glass were strewn across the floor. Silence above, shrieks below, de Solis thought, turning poetic.

"You see? You see?" the director said, as though anyone could miss it.

"I see," de Solis replied. "Yes, this is quite something."

"A representative from the family is coming this afternoon. You had better get on with this and find the thieves. And fast, Inspector. This is a disaster."

"Family?" de Solis asked.

"The Santamarina family! They are great patrons of the museum and donated all the works in this exhibition.

"Ah. *Mucho gaita!*" de Solis grinned, rubbing the tips of his fingers together.

A coarse peasant, the director thought. The money was beside the point. This was a family of taste, Mercedes herself a great collector of the Impressionists, a patron of the arts. Yes. And for one guilty moment, the director worried about his own Christmas bonus.

"We must be able to tell them the works will be recovered. It is a matter of national honor!"

Money talks, de Solis thought to himself, looking around sadly. But aloud he said: "*Claro, señor.*"

Once his two junior officers arrived, de Solis began an actual investigation. Studying the entire situation and the museum logs and interviewing the few people involved, they quickly established the details of the burglary: entry through the window near the construction scaffolding in the middle of the night; the alarm was smashed at some point; the surveillance camera had never been hooked up; the two guards had been drunk and asleep through most of the night. Useless fellows but even so, he had them taken downtown for questioning anyway, just to show his resolve.

From the director he obtained a complete list of the missing works, which also included some statuary and other incidental pieces from nearby galleries. Oddly the most expensive and rare works from the Santamarina wing had not been taken, just the smaller lighter ones. De Solis read the dimensions from the list and measured them with the width of his hands, concluding that the thieves made their decision not on the value of the pieces but on the size. Only those small enough, perhaps, to fit into some kind of case or portfolio. A lead, perhaps.

De Solis was no Sherlock Holmes. He had only seen one of the movies and thought it was too tidy to reveal anything. But as a policeman in Buenos Aires he had seen his share

of crimes both violent and clever. This was neither. From all appearances, it was a simple smash and grab job from an unprotected museum in the dead of night. It was careless and sloppy and this offended his need for worthy criminals to catch. He decided at that instant to find the thieves if only to justify his own sense of duty. Besides, he could already see from the director's anxiety that this theft, dumb as they come, could blow up into a newspaper frenzy, a crime of the century, an attack on the country's treasures or even on the government itself.

Reporters had already arrived at the museum. With all the evils of the junta, there were bigger stories to tell. Yet they still had to be careful about what they pursued and they still had to sell newspapers. So when one of the officers returned to tell him that he had found footsteps in the muddy dirt of the park across the street, de Solis saw his chance to wrap up the case in time to placate the Santamarina family, and before the sheer stupidity of it got around town.

...

True to his word, Dash Wells sent a car for Mo at noon the following day. It was only a Lincoln from Carmel Limousines, but it was still more luxurious than the F train. Mo spent the ride soothed by the soft, heated back seat and focusing on her tablet to the point of mania. The blustery trees along the West Side Highway, the chilly curls in the Hudson River, even the glossy tiles of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel...she saw none of that. Instead there was only the massive march of images on the screen in her lap. As she flicked through them with her finger, each image, each color, had a physical impact on her, making the task somewhat grueling. But by the time she got to the gallery, bleary and achy, she was also some kind of repository of information about the paintings of Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

The gallery was in a huge building in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, a former industrial area now the tentative home of performance artists and adventurous young couples. It had not yet been completely taken over by the realtors and the billionaires and so still retained some of its coarse charm. A sign over the gallery entrance on the street finally explained to Mo why the woman Wells referred to wanted his input about the painting. He may have been a photographer who happened to own a gallery but the sign gave a different impression. It said: Gallerie Renoir.

The space itself was vast and rough, the old brick walls proudly crude, the ducts above them unpainted and sinuous. The floor was made of low-grade factory tiles. The smell of fish lingered somehow. It was the kind of raw space they use in the magazines to shoot absurdly expensive lamps and indeed there seemed to be one, all chrome and neon, in the corner.

But it was an art gallery not a lamp store and the art on display was a mix of trash art, slash art, tech art, neo-retro art, ranging from the lovely to the ludicrous. Mo tried not to look too closely in order to avoid overstuffing her brain but one thing stood out right away. There was no Renoir in sight anywhere. It was all art of the ever-changing moment, that moment too hip to stay put. Anything classic was decades in the future.

As she wandered around, one large piece drew her attention. It was an enormous wall-size photograph of a woman. A portrait showing her head and the upper part of her body. She was standing against a dark decaying wall with splatters of color on it like faint graffiti. The lighting was subtle and soft and gave her a glamorous glow. She was staring

straight out from the photo, her gaze catching you, not letting you look away. She was not conventionally beautiful but this photo made her seem so. Not because her features were right but because she was proud of herself and strong in her stature. She seemed to be holding the handle of a mop like a spear. The colors had been desaturated in the photo but Mo could still detect the ochre skin, the surging blue veins beneath, the sardonyx eyes, those pinky lips.

“Yup, that’s mine,” said a voice behind her.

It was a rich voice like an oboe and it struck a chord inside. She turned to see Dash handing her a glass of winter cider. He was wearing a red tie that brought to mind a tint she had seen in an image of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and embodiment of beauty. From a poster Nabi had on the wall of her bedroom. That red felt just the way warmed cider went down the throat...full and smooth.

Red again. A theme of the season.

“Beautiful,” she said, not knowing herself if she meant the sensation or the woman or the image.

“Thanks,” he replied, deciding that she meant the photo. “She’s a cleaning lady I saw down the block. She has a family in Colombia and sends her pay down to them for food. It’s from a series I’m calling Unseen Women. Cleaning ladies, caretakers, an old woman in a wheelchair. They’re unnoticed, unless they are shoved in our faces at this size. Maybe like this we can see their dignity, their inner beauty.”

“You show your own work here.”

“This gallery is a co-op. I own it with some other artists. But to be honest with you, it is really just an excuse to exhibit our own stuff.”

“I thought you were an art photographer. I mean, that you photographed artwork.”

“I am in both senses. I like to think of myself as an artist. But I also work for museums photographing their collections. That’s why I was involved with the de Kooning.”

“Non-dekooning,” she corrected.

“So you like this one?” he asked, nodding towards the portrait.

She had turned away from the image to face him at this point. But instead of looking right at him up close like that, she closed her eyes. Her brow furrowed as though she was focusing her attention on some inner vision now floating inside her lids.

“I like that color at the upper left, that smudge of warm orange against the deep ochre. It’s like a section from Rembrandt’s *An Old Man in Red*. It feels tingly but soft. But there is also some chrome yellow in the highlights that excites it. And then toned down blue underneath, like old paint now faded and worn. Feels like seltzer left out all afternoon. There is some kind of green fungus or something growing on the wall behind it. Very lush colors, dense and dark. Sand running through your fingers at night. Medieval colors overall...”

She continued like that, recalling the colors perfectly and equating them to physical sensations, almost lost in a rhapsody, until her voice drifted off. Eventually, she opened her eyes as though coming out of a trance.

Dash stared at her for too long but he could not help himself. She had stunning eyes. Medieval eyes? They were green and blue and caressing and it was hard to connect them with such an analytical vision. After all, she was seeing his photograph in her memory of a few seconds of looking and had only gotten to the upper left quadrant. It was an amazing color analysis but she had not even mentioned the subject of the image, the

woman herself. Maybe she would eventually get to it, in many weeks at this rate, he figured.

“Wow,” he said.

He really meant the feeling of looking at her looking at him but the moment was wrong to clarify this.

“Photographic memory, like I said.”

“No,” she said. “People with photographic memories recall every thing as though they took a photo of it. I can’t do that. What I have is a condition called haptochromic synesthesia. I feel colors.”

“Doesn’t everyone? I mean, red feels hot and green feels cool.”

“Everyone has it a little. It’s a hypersensitivity to me, as though colors were actual impressions being made on my body, my skin, my organs. Temperature, pressure, texture.”

“But that helps you remember images, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but only as haptic sensations. As touch. It’s hard to explain.”

“You’d make a great detective. Studying crime scenes.”

“It applies to images not real life. Mostly.”

“Crime scene photos then.”

“No. I have a visceral feeling about colors and I don’t like blood. Especially dried blood. It makes me terribly itchy.”

“You look like someone,” Dash said, changing the subject to something he understood.

“My mom probably.”

“No, I mean someone from old Hollywood.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I know just the shot too. She has her head resting on the back of a chair. Shadow of her eyelash on her cheek...”

Dash realized that he was staring and tried to figure out a way to stop himself before it became a kind of stalking. Luckily at that moment, Blaise Norman came bursting into the gallery with kilowattage in lieu of style, eliminating any subtle shades of feeling that Mo and Dash might have shared.

...

When the other members of the team arrived in their green Ford later on Christmas Day to collect the works, Perón was most surprised about his own reaction. Far from feeling good about completing the assignment, he was almost reluctant to turn the stolen works over. Almost but not, since refusing would have cost him his life. He had seen Navarro shoot someone, just some poor fellow on the street, in cold blood for moving when he told the man not to, and Perón had no doubt he would do it again. Still, it seemed wrong to give them back. The idea that these drawings and paintings were more seductive than working for the secret service was a shock even to him. The beauty he had studied in school resonated deeper than the power of intimidation that came with the job. But when he got the case from under the bed, he did not include the small Renoir –his Renoir – and hoped the other men did not know about it. As he handed the case with the rest of the works over to Navarro, Perón held them in his grip long enough to cause the tall man to scowl.

“What’s gotten into you?” Navarro said.

“*Nada*,” Perón shrugged. “Nothing at all.”

“*Bajá un cambio!*”

But he could not chill out. Suddenly the tall man’s hands seemed clumsy and filthy to him and not worthy of holding these distinctive pieces. Perón was glum throughout the entire ride, an attitude his colleagues mistook for annoyance. After all, they were hoping for more dangerous assignments than stealing some dumb pictures from a museum. Something more along the lines of arresting unsuspecting citizens when they least expected it. Interrogations and even exterminations. Something cool. Unlike Perón, the other two were *chorros* from the streets of Buenos Aires. They spent their time robbing their neighbors, fighting with knives, smoking hand-rolled joints, and kicking soccer balls through store windows. The junta had hired them due to this experience.

Perón’s mood only changed when he realized that they were not driving to the local office of the SIDE, but instead to a fancy block over in Puerto Madero, a very ritzy part of town. The house they pulled up to was a mansion; a servant in a suit even answered the door. The three men were told to wait in the lobby near a marble table with a small fountain of water gushing. Navarro pushed his finger into it and sent water spraying. After a while, a man came into the room to greet them. He was an older fellow in a white suit with a white tie and white hair, so naturally Perón thought of him as Mr. White as everyone else did. His real name was never mentioned.

Mr. White took the case from Navarro and handed it over to his servant who carried it solemnly, like a sacred text, into another room.

“You have done well. Yes indeed, very well. I will be speaking to your captain about you,” Mr. White said, shaking each of their hands in turn.

“What happens to them?” Perón asked, and immediately knew he had made a gaffe.

“*Perdone, señor*,” Navarro said by way of apology, bowing with the effort.

“Not at all, you have a right to know,” Mr. White replied with great understanding. “These works by some of the world’s most renowned artists will be well used in the service of the Great Reorganization. What you fellows have done is to liberate them from the hands of the few,” and here he held his own hands together as though strangling a swallow, “to be delivered into the hands of the many. The people of Argentina.”

Arms wide now to include all of the Pampas, he patted Perón on the shoulder and managed at the same time to shove him out the door.

“*Gil!*” Navarro said outside, slapping Perón on the head as an exclamation. “Don’t you realize who you were talking to? That man could have you shot on the spot.”

Perón did not reply. But as he walked out through the front gate, he felt somehow relieved that the artwork would be in the hands of a rich man, a cultured man, a man of taste. Not these thugs he was now working with. At least that is what he told himself to avoid nightmares that night.

...

In a weird way, Blaise Norman fit right in at the gallery. Not as a visitor but as one of the sculptures. She was an ample and attractive woman but had gone one step beyond in accessories. Her thick blonde hair was capped by a floral pouf; three gold necklaces and a wristful of bracelets made her jangle as she walked over to introduce herself. If her accent

was an odd combo of South Texan and North Carolinian, that made sense. She had once been homecoming queen in Raleigh and a barmaid deeper down south in Houston.

But now, as she vivaciously shook their hands and explained, she was just a plain old Southern gal with a great old job as a fundraiser for a good old charity called the Norwan Foundation.

In the office behind the gallery, Mo and Dash sat down with her to discuss the topic at hand. For this, Blaise Norman pulled out an iPad from a rather loud Lana Marks electric blue leather handbag and handed it over with the pride of a granny. Mo knew the color of that bag from a Miró she had seen once that made her cough and where it made more sense. In this context, it only made her wheeze.

“This here is the painting I’ve been chattering about,” Blaise said. “It’s a real beauty, isn’t it? *Girl with a Red Bow* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. See the girl and see the bow?”

She pronounced the artist’s name as “Pear August Ren War” which, given her whole demeanor, came across as more disarming than alarming.

Mo and Dash leaned into the screen for a closer look.

Dash was impressed. What he saw was a vivid scan of a portrait. The iPad had a Retina display with 264ppi, an amazing resolution for such a thin screen. Great color saturation; excellent tonality range. Very cool. He thought of getting one himself. And the painting being displayed on it? It was fine too.

Mo saw it differently. To her, the image was a thicket of tactile sensations. The colors were gentle but also firm. Like a facial, she thought. Not a deep pore scrub but more like a soothing spa treatment. The russets like fingers tapping, the teals like palms pressing, and the tans like thumbs making tiny little massage motions around the cheeks. There was a splotch of red like a slap on the back to stimulate the circulation. That it happened to be a portrait of a young girl with a red bow in her hair was irrelevant to the impact in that moment. Flirty girls and tousled hair never entered her mind. Mo would remember the painting perfectly from the push and pull of the colors, but it might just as well have been upside down and passed through a car wash for the way it registered in her visual cortex.

“It looks similar to other ones I’ve seen,” Mo said. “But this is different.”

“That’s the darn truth, darlin,” Blaise said and winked at Dash. “You were right to bring her along into this. This here is a little girl he sometimes used as a model.”

“Little girl?” Mo repeated.

Dash quickly gestured at the eyes, the nose, and the mouth with his finger to indicate the face to Mo. When that did not register, he held the iPad up next to his head and posed, hoping to make the connection for her.

“Oh, you mean the girl,” Mo said, suddenly seeing it. “Yes, the model is familiar. But this portrait is not anywhere.”

“Where anywhere?” Dash asked.

“The online samples of works by Renoir. He did scores of drawings and paintings of girls like this but I did not see this particular one at all. Has it just come to light or something?”

“Oh Dash,” Blaise said, exuding either charm or overacting, “she is a keeper. You are right again, honey. This is nowhere in any catalog “reasonay,” pardon my French. This here work has never even been seen in public. My business associate has obtained a

hitherto unknown work by the great master. *Hitherto!* Don't you just love my choice of words."

"I'm still not quite sure how we can help you," Dash said.

"What I would just love, my darlings, is for the two of you to see the original and give me your impression of it. Perhaps Dash, you can even take an archival photo of it. This silly screen shot does not do my little girl with a red bow in her hair any justice at all. She is just so much prettier in the flesh, so to speak."

"Why don't you go directly to a Renoir expert?" Mo asked.

"Oh I will, sweetie, I most certainly will. But first things first. With a technically accurate photo and your knowledge of Renoir..."

"Sorry," Mo said. "There's some misunderstanding. I have no knowledge of Renoir. I'm not an art expert."

"You've seen all his work and remember it. Most of them so-called Renoir experts can't make that claim, hon. With your help, I – that is, we at the Foundation – can move forward with this verification."

"Are you planning to sell it?" Dash asked.

"Oh no," Blaise said. "Nothing of the kind. My business partner, the owner of this little girl with her adorable red bow, does not want to sell it. He loves the work and wants to keep it."

"So what then?" Mo asked.

"Well, my darlings, get yourselves ready for another one of them big fancy words that you just know I love to use. He wants to *hypothecate* it."

Blaise made a gesture with her hands like tossing currency onto a table for a huge payoff that neither Mo nor Dash was willing to pick up.

At least not yet.

...

Following de Solis' orders, one of the officers traced the muddy footsteps back to a house on the far side of the Plaza Francia, across the street from the museum. Normally de Solis would have done this himself but the museum director insisted that he stick around to meet the representative of the Santamarina family when he arrived. This was not just another investigation by the local police, as he tried delicately to explain; this was a political nightmare. Was the junta in control or not? Were rich families to be respected or not? Were Argentina's treasures to be valued or not? Was the rule of law taken seriously or not?

De Solis occupied the time by watching another of his officers gather up the evidence – all those broken frames and panes on the floor of the gallery – and waiting for a list of the pieces that were missing.

"Got it chief!" said the policeman on the footprint mission, returning wet and out of breath.

"Got what, Hektor?"

"The tracks, the footprints. I mean the house. Well, the woman who lives there," he said and flipped through his notepad. "Her name is Maria Elimendo. A gypsy or something. She lives on the other side of the park. Maybe she can help. She knows the future."

"What?"

“She reads palms.”
“Well, where is she?”
“At home, I suppose. There was a light on.”
“Do you read palms, Hektor?”
“Uh, no boss.”
“Minds then?”
“No.”
“Well then go get her! Bring her here. What use is her name? We need to find out what she saw. Yes?”
“Sure boss.”
“Let’s go, Hektor. Snap snap. Pretend you’re a policeman rather than a fool in a uniform.”

When the director returned with a list of the missing works, de Solis ran down the names with his thumb as though checking a grocery list. Matisse, Renoir, Degas. The names were barely recognizable to him. But when he counted them up, he noticed something unusual and he pointed this out to the director.

“Seventeen,” he said.
“Excuse me Inspector?”
“Seventeen,” de Solis repeated. “There were seventeen works taken from this gallery. Your list only has sixteen.”

The director looked at the list again and seemed to end up agreeing with himself.
“No, it is sixteen. This list is right. I am sure of that.”
“I am a simple man, *señor*,” de Solis said. “My father grew rye grain. I don’t know about art at all. But I assure you, I am still able to count up to seventeen.”

The director counted the titles on the list out loud one by one to prove his point. *Uno, dos, tres*. He smiled wanly when he reached *dieciséis* and announced the word in triumph.

De Solis shook his head and pointed to an aluminum table they had set up and on which his officer had placed the broken frames.

“Yes, sixteen listed here. But there are seventeen frames. *Uno, dos, tres*...you see what I mean?”

The director’s face drooped as he confronted the discrepancy.

“*Ay no*,” he said, hoping that this annoying little fact would magically go away.

But it did not, it lingered.

For decades.

...

“Hypothecate,” Mo repeated.

She was waiting for Blaise to continue, hoping more words would fill in the gap in her vocabulary. Was it something to do with a pharmacy? But Dash was faster on his iPhone and had a definition in no time.

“You want to put it up for collateral,” he said.

“Exactly right,” Blaise confessed. “My partner, Mister Jong Lung Wan, is trying to use this little girl as collateral for a bank loan to our foundation. We want to have it

valuated for that purpose and use the loan funds in our charity work. I'm sure that's worth your time, isn't it?"

"That's fine with me," Dash said.

Why not, he thought. It was something new, a little adventure, a road not taken. And even more, it was another reason to see Mo again. Besides, it would not hurt the reputation of the gallery to be involved and might even get some good PR. He turned to Mo but did not see the same reaction. Instead, she was playing with the ends of her hair. This was a *tell* he knew from his sister...a sign that she was nervous.

"So where is it?" Mo asked. "You don't have it with you?"

"Oh dears, the painting isn't here with me. I don't have it in my possession at all."

"When will you get it?"

"We would much prefer if you two fine young people went to the painting rather than the other way around."

"Yes but where exactly is it?" Mo asked, thinking somewhere else in Brooklyn. Or Manhattan. Or at the farthest, possibly northern New Jersey. She was a typical New Yorker who thought that winding up somewhere else was some kind of goof. She was also not thrilled about traveling.

"Not far. The work is safe and sound right up there in Boston."

"All the way in Massachusetts?" Mo whined.

Blaise and Dash looked at her as though she had just arrived on the planet. Seeing this, Mo tried to get hold of herself.

"I mean why not just send it here?"

"My dears, you must see that this is a real valuable piece of art. Mr. Wan as the actual owner of it prefers not to let it leave his sight. He keeps it in safe storage there."

"How did he or you or either of you get involved with this? Where does the painting come from? How did you happen to..."

Mo had questions. Qualms. They both did. But all of these seemed to drift through a cloud of evasions or interlocking stories. After a long back and forth, the question of how a previously unknown work by a famous Impressionist ended up in the hands of a Taiwanese man living in Boston who had become partners in a charity foundation with a Texan remained unanswered. So did the issue of how all this came to involve a Brooklyn photographer who owned a gallery called Gallerie Renoir with no Renoirs, and a woman with a colorful memory.

But Blaise Norman seemed unmoved by all this doubt. In fact, in her own mind at least, she swept all those issues aside with a simple offer. She would give them \$10,000 each just to spend a couple of days in Massachusetts to see and shoot the work.

This seemed like a lot of money for a quick view of a small picture and, though they barely looked at each other at that moment, they both struggled to seem both blasé and appreciative at the same time. For Dash, funds to run the gallery were always welcome. He made a decent living but that was mostly from his museum work. Extra money could be used to support artists who were not yet selling well enough to support themselves. This was so reasonable to him at the time that it outweighed concerns about how slippery the whole enterprise seemed. Mo had the opposite view, the one in which slippery came out on top. But on the other hand, she needed the money for a reason that she purposely did not share with either of her two new associates then.

As a result, neither of them said *yes* right away.
But they did not say *no* either.

THREE

“I can't imagine becoming bored with red – it would be like becoming bored with the person you love.”

Diana Vreeland

Alfredo Gonzalo Calvado was a skinny, jittery little man in a tense suit. An elfin attorney, he also had a weak chin and a cheap manicure but as one of the many representatives for the Santamarina family he had a stature well beyond his presence. As he surveyed the scene, he seemed barely surprised that there had been no security to protect the collection. No one thought there would be any need. After all, the military junta ruled with an iron fist and the police worked for the army, which was brutal in its ways and means. Crime in the cities was at an all-time low. So was freedom but that was a different matter.

Calvado had in his briefcase a list of all the works in the collection and de Solis watched as he and the director compared this with the list of stolen works. After much nodding and pointing and writing, they seemed to reach a neat mutual conclusion...sixteen works, chosen by size, had been taken from the gallery.

“But what about this extra frame?” de Solis asked.

This annoyed him because, however unrefined he was, he was a cop and did not like loose ends. The director coughed to mask the question but de Solis was certain that Calvado heard him, even though he did not respond.

“No matter there, Inspector,” the director said. “It is simply a misunderstanding.”

“In the matter of counting?” de Solis asked.

“In terms of priorities,” the director replied. “The works donated by the family are of utmost concern. That is these sixteen pieces. Please do not churn the waters, so to speak. No mention of this in your report to the Ministry, yes?”

”My report is expected to be accurate...”

“And so it will be, I am sure. But not accurate to the point of scrutiny, if I make myself clear.”

Was this a veiled threat of some kind, de Solis wondered? Why was this other work, whatever it was, being ignored? Why would the museum keep this a secret? With an eye for crime and an ear for deception honed on the streets of Buenos Aires, de Solis decided that there was perhaps something, as the Americans say, *fishy* about how the museum had obtained it, this extra work. Illegally maybe or questionably. That had to be it. And they therefore did not want the world to know that they even had it in the first place. Let alone that they lost it to sloppy thieves.

De Solis said nothing in reply, but in his mind he was rehearsing a report that left out some key facts. He did not like the idea, but he liked avoiding trouble more. Without an ability to read the future himself, he could not know how wrong he was about this.

...

“We’ll have to get back to you about it,” Dash finally said to Blaise Norman, sensing the uncertainty on Mo’s part.

“Of course you do,” Blaise said. “Talk it over amongst yourselves. See what you all think. I’m staying at the Ritz-Carlton over there on Central Park until tomorrow. Then back home. I hope you take up our little old quest.”

“I’m tempted,” Mo said, simply to avoid disappointing her.

It was a non-answer answer. The fact is that she could use the money because she was out of work, or at least on a very long leave from her job at Artolog, an online image bank. This had not been her employer’s choice. On the contrary, her remarkable visual memory made her a valuable image manager. But the thousands – or was it hundreds of thousands – of images she saw each day were not just glimpses to her, they were impingements. Tactile, sensual memories. Clear, intense, detailed impressions that she could not erase. If Nabi talked about dreams that seemed real as life, Mo’s dreams were of watercolors and snapshots so intense in their colors that she began to feel like someone pummeled by life itself. Flattened, actually, into a slim existence inside the pixel-thin plane of the pictures. Life, the real one of atoms and molecules and people, was beginning to fade into the background and this was disturbing. Faces were beginning to remind her of portraits, rather than the other way around. And the colors in the images were becoming more vivid to her than their pale echoes in the real world. That is why she wore sunglasses indoors, to cut down the input. A padded cell was next.

To stop this drifting away from life, she took what she called a “visual sabbatical” just to get away from the deluge of imagery, to clear her head. It was hardly working but it was in this regard that ten grand for a couple of days in New England seemed reasonable, even if she was a reluctant tourist. Yet she still had her suspicions.

“So how about a trip to Boston?” Dash asked breezily once Blaise was gone.

“I don’t think so.”

“No?”

“Look at it from my point of view,” Mo said. “A strange, but attractive, man invites me to an emergency Valentine’s Day meeting to get my judgment on an art forgery, then lures me into a questionable encounter at a misnamed gallery with an oddball woman with a mysterious partner who claims to have possession of an unknown work by a modern master that can only be seen by going to Boston and who is willing to pay \$20,000 to two non-experts for their feedback. Does that sound rational to you?”

“You think I’m attractive?”

“That’s beside the point. It’s insane is what it is and I’m going to go home now and order some Chinese food to sane myself back up. Scallion pancakes, which always works. Their taste brings to mind the massaging red in the middle of a maple leaf in early November. Something tangible.”

“Boston has great Chinatown restaurants.”

“Swell.”

“Look, I know this is all very unusual and it is as weird to me as it is to you. But doesn’t that make it exciting?”

“No, it makes it alarming.”

“Think about it this way. We can go there, stay in separate hotels if you like, view the work, and come back that same day if you want. Nothing weird, nothing crazy. No pressure. Frankly, I could use the money. You can trust me. I’m a good guy.”

“Really? Then why do you have a gallery named Gallerie Renoir if you don’t have a single Renoir in it?”

“That was the name.”

“That was what name?”

“Gallerie Renoir was the name of the gallery before we bought it. The owner was Seymour Renoir. We just haven’t gotten around to changing it. Ms. Norman didn’t seem to care about that.”

“And that in itself doesn’t strike you as odd?”

“Sure it does. But that’s her decision not mine. Why not take her money and do the gig? What could possibly go wrong with that?”

Mo Kline, daughter of a man whose idol was the gangster Arnold Rothstein, could easily come up with any number of answers to that question. But she kept silent so as not to give fate any ideas.

...

Having completed the Santamarina job, Perón was placed permanently on Navarro’s team, which was fine with him. This was not one of the scarier units that were kidnapping political enemies in the street in the middle of the day. It was not the *Batallon de Inteligencia 601*, for example, a special service in the army that infiltrated human rights advocates and socialists and coordinated killings and kidnappings of these traitors, and to which Navarro suggested that they apply. Navarro may have envied those agents but Perón himself had no taste for anything like that.

His plan was different...to keep a low profile until, inevitably, the junta lost power and he could return to more refined pursuits. Go back to school perhaps, get an advanced degree, and teach at the university. He got his wish, at least to the extent that the three men were never given anything more dangerous or thrilling than the museum burglary.

Instead, they were assigned various surveillance tasks around Buenos Aires, observations and reports, and also told to check out other museums throughout the region to see if similar heists would prove as easy as the National Museum. For this, Perón, who had been a good student, used his skills in research and organization to good effect on the squad. His reports were useful and he therefore was largely left alone.

But when Navarro arrived one day to pick him up for a job, he thought it odd that Perón did not invite him upstairs but instead met him in the hallway of the building downstairs.

“*Un secreto?*” Navarro asked, nodding up towards the door to Perón’s apartment.

“No, it’s just a mess,” Perón said.

“*Un agente secreto con un secreto,*” Navarro quipped. “I think you must be hiding something.”

“*Pavadas!* Don’t be stupid.”

“I think young Perón has taken something that does not belong to him,” Navarro said and started up the stairs. “You do have a reputation, after all.”

Perón wondered for a moment whether he had left the Renoir on the dresser as he sometimes did to admire it, or if he had hidden it back under the bed as he usually did

when he left for the day. Beneath the glare of the tall man's stare, he could not remember and began to fumber.

"I...no...it's..."

"I get it, pal. We all have secrets. Just be sure yours does not get you killed."

"Good advice," Perón said, trying to laugh when he felt like screaming. "A temptation is best left unannounced."

In Spanish, this was a version of an expression that, in the slang of the streets, really said "don't tell the dictator you are fucking his wife." Perón hoped that Navarro would get the hint from this that the secret in his apartment was a real woman, not just a portrait of one. It seemed to work because Navarro came back down the stairs. But the look Navarro had as he passed him out the door was not at all sympathetic. It was leery and it made Perón cringe.

...

Occasionally, to escape the barrage of hues and tints that penetrated her skull and never left, Mo sat in a chair with a dark satin eyeshade and earphones listening to the sounds of the ocean. It was neutral territory that summoned the least amount of visual imagery and was therefore a kind of vacation for her cortex.

But Nabi, with her own agenda, kept pulling Mo back to the real world.

"Should you not be packing?" she asked, suddenly appearing inside the fantasy in a gushy strawberry bikini.

"No, since I am not going anywhere," Mo said without removing the shades.

"You said you liked him."

"Not enough to go away with."

"Not enough. This is your mantra. Not enough, not enough. No one is ever enough."

In her mind's eye, Nabi was now floating on the ocean inside the eyeshade and causing a small tide that was threatening her serenity. She took the earphones off to erase the scene.

"I don't shuttle off on exotic weekends with attractive men," Mo explained, although that sounded dumb even to her. "I mean with strange men that I don't know."

"Perhaps you should. You need to change your pattern or nothing will change."

Easy for you to say, Mo thought. Nabi was voluptuous and earthy and Indian and everything guys in bars drool over besides free beer. She was completely at peace with herself as a woman with men. Everyone else had to be more cautious or more willing to be hurt. Mo chose the former.

"You have to get over him some way," Nabi said.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You have to get over him," Nabi scolded, "And this is a good way."

"I am over him," Mo said.

"He was a rat. But not all men are rats."

"I don't even know who you are talking about. See what I mean?"

At this, just to make the point, she took off the eye mask too and stared right at Nabi who was sitting cross-legged across from her. But far from ending the discussion, this just convinced Nabi that she was right.

"Do not take your flannel PJs," she said, shaking a finger. "They are a romance killer."

"I won't for the simple reason that I am not going anywhere!"

...

Calvado the lawyer was especially keen on knowing the status of the investigation since he had to report back to the family that night. De Solis assured him that it was moving along in spite of the fact that it was, in truth, dead in the water. The guards, he knew, would probably be tortured for information since that was the only method the secret service ever seemed to use. They knew how to exploit fear. But de Solis knew about people and he was convinced that the guards knew nothing or at least had no direct role in the theft. In which case, besides the debris left behind, there was nothing much to go on.

But when one of his officers came and whispered something in his ear, de Solis held his hand up in the air, a sign to Calvado to wait a moment.

“Let me get back to you in an hour,” he said to the lawyer.

“Do you have a lead?”

“I have a witness. I would like to talk to her.”

“By all means, Inspector. Just make sure that your witness becomes a lead by the time I leave here.”

Whether this was a suggestion or a threat, de Solis could not say. But he left the lawyer standing in the blank gallery and went to one of the conference rooms where the witness – Maria Elimendo – was waiting, sorting cards on the table. She wore a black dress and black shoes and had a black scarf on her head. Her eyes were black but all of these, the heavy lipstick too, were merely signs of her trade. When she looked up at him, he saw the dark circles under her large eyes, an indication of her weariness of foretelling.

“You have a cloud in the sky of your soul,” she said to him in a hoarse voice as he walked into the room. “I can see it.”

“Yes, well. Let us hope it merely is a sign of rain. Precisely so.”

“The cards suggest that you must learn the lesson of obedience.”

“Please, *señora*, I am a simple public servant. I truly know about obedience. Now may we turn to the matter at hand?”

“The future is the only matter of importance.”

“But was not the present once the future?” de Solis said, turning philosophic.

“I suppose so.”

“Good, then let us discuss a future past that has now become our problem today. Namely, what you saw on Christmas Eve. You were in the park across the street?”

“My black cat, my *Lucianegra*, ran out of my house and I went after her.”

“And tell me what you saw.”

“I saw all manner of evil deeds among men. *Maldigamos la oscuridad.*”

“Yes, let us curse the darkness but also revel in the light. That streetlight out there for instance. What did you see in the light?”

“I saw three men – *tres demonios* – walking across the boulevard.”

“Coming from the museum?”

“Yes, towards the park, to a car that was parked on the street.”

“What time was this?”

“After midnight.”

“Could it have been around 3 am?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Could you identify them?”

“No. One, I could not see at all. The second one was tall and the other young. But their faces were in shadow. The streetlight was only shining on the car. And I was hiding in the bushes.”

“Hiding?”

“When you see the devil, you do not show off.”

“Who was the devil exactly?”

“Your life line is rather short,” she said, noticing his hand.

“Yes. This is why we must get to the facts rather quickly. What happened next?”

“I watched them get in the car and drive off.”

“And that’s all?”

“That is all.”

“Do you know what kind of car it was?”

“No!”

“But you said the streetlight...”

“It was the dark of night. *Los diablos juegan de noche!*”

“What do you mean devils play at night. Why devils?”

But to this, Elimendo had no answer and instead turned to the window and stared outside. The troubled look on her face suggested to de Solis that she knew more than she was saying.

“*Señora,*” de Solis pleaded, “do you understand that you may be called to give a testimony about all of this in a court? But perhaps if you tell me right now in private, what you saw, then your involvement may end here.”

It took a few minutes for the hint to sink in, at which point the woman put down the deck of cards and stared right into his eyes.

“*Verde,*” she said so quietly that it was hard to make out.

“What?”

“The car. *Un auto verde.*”

“Yes? A green car? The license plate perhaps?”

“A Ford Falcon, Inspector,” she said more emphatically.

That stopped de Solis dead in his dying tracks.

Silence filled the void for many minutes.

“Again?” he said, hoping he misunderstood.

But there was no need for her to repeat it and she did not. The term lingered in the air like a disease, turning the fortuneteller to stone and de Solis stone cold.

...

A week later, they met at the Petrie Court Café at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for lunch. This seemed to Mo at once less intense than a dinner and more genial than a fancy restaurant. It perfectly suited her mix of caution and interest. The café was light and open, no hidden shadows; plenty of space between the tables, not overly intrusive; sleek and modern, no hint of a history. The tall glass wall overlooked Central Park; room to escape. Plus, if things went sour she could always walk back through the Greek sculpture hall where the pale statues calmed her overactive brain.

Dash was trying to explain, both to her and to himself, why Blaise Norman was insisting on their viewing of the Renoir.

“Trail of evidence,” he said.

“That sounds to me like a crime novel.”

“She wants to build up opinion. So she comes to us first.”

“Because of your absurd gallery name.”

”Yes but that is enough to get the ball rolling. Like an opinion snowball, one influences the next. I take a photo, so now she has a photographer on her side.”

“And why me?”

“You’ve done work for museums, plus your realization that this is a new Renoir never seen before. One more judgment to bolster her case that this is a real and rare Renoir. It makes it that much harder for some true Renoir expert further down the line, who might not take her seriously without support. And so on.”

“Okay but this all sounds fishy to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I grew up with a fisherman and I know the smell of rotten fish.”

“Where was that?”

“Right near the state pen.”

“State pen?”

“An inside joke.”

“Inside what?”

“Never mind.”

The salad Mo ordered was a *Barbabietole* with roasted beets, lentils, arugula, frisée, stracciatella, candied pistachios. The beets were a thick and lusty red, dense as a warm outdoor bath. Dash had the burger specialty. All-Natural Black Angus beef with a house-made barbecue sauce, New York State white-cheddar, house-made pickles, and a potato bun. Mo noted that her choice as written on the menu was filled with commas but that his was all dashes. Her name was in the word “commas” and his, of course, in the word “dashes.” Hidden messages? Or did it mean that she wanted to keep things separate but that he found links more appealing.

None of that, she thought. It was all just a fancy way of searching for signs to tell her what to do next.

“Explain this to me,” Dash said. “Back at the museum, did you really recall the exact redness in the painting two years later?”

“I thought you believed me.”

“I did. I just don’t understand how you do that.”

“Join the club. It’s just something I do.”

“How does it work?”

“It’s synesthesia. They think that different sensory input gets crossed in the brain so that a piece of music can appear in the mind as a complex grid of colors. Or that time can be seen spacially; Monday is always further away than Wednesday. Or letters have colors so an M strikes one as teal. Or shapes have taste...a cylinder seems tangy. They think that all sense input is mushed up like that at first in the tangle of neurons in the brain. But the neural connections get pruned as the brain develops. Refined. Except in some people. Me.

“Wow.”

“Yup.”

“Turns out you might be right. One of the restorers at the museum signed out that archival photo. He might have been working on a copy and switched it when the painting came back from a museum in Dallas. They’re looking into it.”

“Campion must be pissed.”

“Very. But Hammerman was impressed and he’s in charge. He might use you again.”

“Remind me to wear my Kevlar camisole.”

“You wear camisoles?”

“No.”

“Okay then. So what about Boston?” he asked, brightly.

...

“My dear Inspector,” Calvado said with great expectation, finding de Solis in the hallway outside the director’s office. “And is our little crime solved? May I give the family good news?”

De Solis, looking pale and ill and like he had swallowed a golf ball that got stuck, had a ready answer: “You may tell them what I am about to tell the museum director. The case is closed.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The work is gone and will not be recovered. There will be no further investigation into this matter.”

“But Inspector, surely...”

At this point they were joined by the director who was catching the drift of de Solis’ conclusion from all the way down the hall.

“What is this you say? No further what?”

“There are no clues, no leads, no witnesses at all. No traces or tracks. The guards were asleep, the cameras not connected. It was the perfect crime. Mastermind criminals! Nothing more to report!”

De Solis was adjusting his hat, his belt, his hair, and his collar as he said this. Anything to show conclusively that he was finished, tidying up, setting things straight. The order of finality. Leaving. Right now.

“But surely inspector there are...”

“Surely, certainly, and without a doubt. There is nothing. My report will show that all avenues of inquiry were pursued and that these brilliant thieves outsmarted us all. I suggest that you install a far more effective system of security from this point on.

Señores, espero que tengan un buen día!”

It was all de Solis could do to stop himself from actually racing out to the main exit of the museum as though a fire had been announced. On the way he grabbed the collar of one of his officers and yanked him along. The shouts of the director and lawyer to come back and explain himself soon echoed in the empty hallways like a rumor of protest.

Later on, back at the police station, de Solis wrote his report in just the way that he promised and officially the matter ended there. Since he was in charge of investigations the district, there was no one else to consult on the matter or to appeal to. The case was closed.

Dutiful, patriotic, and no idiot, de Solis continued in his job until retirement. No questions were ever asked about the theft. No one came forth to challenge his conclusion.

But de Solis was also tidy and methodical. He did not care for unsolved mysteries. Strictly for his own curiosity, he continued to ask around as delicately as possible. The green Ford Falcon, as anyone in Buenos Aires knew, meant *los servicios secretos*. All roads to that organization ended in death. But why on earth, he wondered, would the junta direct the secret service to steal art from the National Museum? And as blatantly and clumsily as they did, with no attempt at diversion or cover-up. Of course they knew that no one would stop them or interfere in any way. And if found out, who would dare report it? Not de Solis himself certainly. He valued his uneventful life.

Yet the question lingered and de Solis decided to play a little Sherlock Holmes, even though he disliked the movies, and clear up the facts. He persisted at this for years, until he had his answer. It was an answer that he would never share with anyone. Never ever. Until he did.

...

“Could the color in an archival photo be off that much?” Mo asked.

“It’s unusual but it can happen. No one did a color analysis of it to make sure it was true. We’re more careful now.”

“And no one noticed but me?”

“No one seemed to have. Red is tricky. It’s the most intense color. Very emotional. It’s hard to look at it rationally,” he said and took a sip of his Merlot. “Plus, the light hitting the surface changes the effect of the colors anyway. Different conditions of light alter how the camera records the color and even how we interpret the colors. That makes it hard to see differences.”

“Yes, and colors influence how we perceive the colors right next to them like those Bauhaus color illusions.”

“It’s a complicated thing, seeing colors. Maybe not for you but for most normal folks.”

“Normal?” she said, taking offense. “I’m normal. I’m just different.”

“So unless someone does a methodical spectral analysis of color patches all across the painting and in the photo to compare them, the eye can be fooled. Besides, people just assume that photos are accurate copies of reality. For a lot of reasons, they are anything but.”

“Colors are in the brain anyway,” Mo added. “There’s no light or hue or color chips in there; nothing but brain goop. The brain interprets light waves. All sorts of things can trick it.”

“Yet you have this amazing ability. Where does that come from?”

“Brain goop.”

“What do you do with it? When you’re not pissing off people like Campion,” Dash asked, pouring more wine in her glass and watching the reflection in the light of her blue eyes. “For a living I mean.”

“I was in image management but I just took time off to clear my head. I’m thinking of becoming some kind of freelance image consultant, if there is such a thing.”

“Like for the museum.”

“I was hoping that would lead to something but I don’t want to work for Campion.”

“Then Boston is perfect.”

“How do you figure that?”

“You’re like a color detective. Think of this as the next case.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“You’re still nervous about it? It’s easy money. And not illegal. Ten grand?”

“Things that sound too good to be true, in my world, usually are.”

“Is that fisherman thinking again?”

“No, that’s the fish stinking,” she corrected.

...

One night two years after the heist, Fernando Perón had his first thought of escape.

The world he lived in, the world of Argentina during the junta, *la última dictadura*, was dark and sordid. Harsh as the desert and just as desolate. Under the veil of civility and culture in Buenos Aires, he knew very well, was a cruel and fatal face.

Word of the forced disappearances, the illegal arrests, and the senseless beatings in the street was spreading. No longer just rumors but daily anecdotes in the marketplace. He had seen soldiers loot the homes of those taken into custody, knew personally of government spies at the universities reporting on professors, heard the stories about pregnant women giving birth in unnamed prisons, the babies given to associates of the regime. How many dissidents, left-wingers, unionists, socialists, students, journalists had been killed...thousands or tens of thousands?

He was walking one day past the Plaza de Mayo and saw the demonstration there. The Mothers who dared to protest openly in front of the presidential palace. Somehow in the choking grip of the junta, these women found a voice. These ordinary women, these housewives and homebodies with their white scarves, chanting under banners on tablecloths with the words “Ninos Desaparecidos” and “Asesinas.” Their faces, the faces of the unseen, of pure pain and rage. On this day, they carried blank life-size cardboard cutouts of their “disappeared” sons. Soldiers surrounded them, but dared not move. The police were nowhere to be seen.

Perón felt ashamed then. What gave these women the courage he himself could not muster? His own mother had passed away years ago, but was she somehow frowning at him now?

The *Guerra Sucia* some of the newspapers called it; the Dirty War. And he was part of it. Not even because he did nothing, which would have been bad enough, but because he joined it to save his own skin. The thought sickened him. To take away the bitter taste on that evening as on so many others, he took out the girl with the red bow and placed her on the dresser as though she were right there in the room with him. With this simple gesture, the darkness retreated.

In art, to his way of thinking, depravity vanished and the rough world faded away. In the pictures in the museums and the books, all was fresh and bright and unhidden. Things were just what they were – the apple an apple, the boat a boat just like that boat and no other. There were no secrets. No lies and deceptions. There were lovers and heroes and martyrs in those frames and even the simplest sketch of a hand held the promise of a kinder touch.

Like his little girl with her rosy bow who would never turn on him, never delude him. She would never lose her innocence, never grow old and tired, never be betrayed by her dreams or her country. Her bow would never wilt or rot or crumble to dust. Her

expression would never turn sour. So it was with all those pictures, perfect in their moments, frozen in their beauty, unchanging. And this one was right there with him, the silent love waiting for him to save them both from cruel truth.

Perón was no fool. He knew that he was not actually in love with this girl made of colored dust and oil. He was in love with the fable that she lived, the one that said that life could be vivid without being terrifying, intense without damaging. Pure, in other words, in a way that real people with their vicious acts could never be. It was a lovely tale that he wanted to believe in. But in Buenos Aires under the boot, this was impossible.

That was when he decided to leave the city. Before he was told to become a brute himself or to hurt someone else or ruin a family. So far he had only supplied information but how soon before he would be asked to become heartless? Yes, he said aloud as a kind of vow, he would sneak out in the middle of the night to start a new life somewhere else. Anywhere else.

He would take nothing with him, no mementos, nothing to connect him to this time and this place. Nothing but his little girl to help him make a new future. But he also knew that he had to wait for the right moment or the others would suspect and in suspecting, without a moment's hesitation, destroy them both.

The decision he made as he sat awake that night was both desperate and calculated. It would change the course of his life and in that way the girl with her red bow became not just a fixation but his fixer, his hope, the untouched lover at first and eventually, as their timelines diverged, the devoted daughter he would never have.

FOUR

“Colors pursue me like a constant worry.
They even worry me in my sleep.”
Claude Monet

If the money and Dash and the Renoir and Nabi were not enough to convince her to go to Boston, in the end the train was.

Mo was afraid of flying. In a girlhood filled with uncertainty, the idea of hurtling through in the air in a tin can was not an adventure to her. It was lunacy. She avoided it the way pilots steer clear of landmarks.

But Nabi, convinced that she could nudge Mo into a relationship and thereby get her privacy back, went online to show her the high-speed train to Boston. That seemed to work. The Acela was comfy with plenty of legroom, the aisles wide and clear, the bathroom generous. There was a bar car if she got bored. There, she could look out the window and watch the cities, the buildings, the fields go by, no image lasting for too long. A blur of colors that would not stick. All of that, plus the reduced likelihood of plummeting 35,000 feet to her death, added up to a good reason to go, if only to get everyone off her back. The train also reminded Mo of her own Lionel set that her father had handed down to her, and then gambled away in a poker game. She missed it.

It worked perfectly at first. The steady rhythm of the train, grinding or grumbling or shimmying as it pushed north through Connecticut, lulled her into a semi-sleep in which she dreamed about being on a train. It was a pleasant enough fantasy until *he* showed up. Somewhere in the depths of her will power she tried to erase him from the dream. When that did not work she tried to have the conductor escort him into the next car. By the time she was struggling to kick him out through the open window, she woke up breathing hard and sweating.

She had been dating Russ for three years before she was able to admit to herself that he was a lying skunk. Why was that? She, of all people, knew lies very well. She had grown up with them. Her radar for scammers and conmen was always on but with him she ignored her own instincts...and for what? The illusion of being in love? It was pathetic. Like those sad women on reality TV who were blind to the truth right in front of them. Had she become one herself simply to avoid being alone?

There had been clues all along: the woman calling the apartment and pretending to have the wrong number, the missing jewelry, the finances never quite adding up. When she had had enough and finally confronted him about the affair and the deception, he burst into tears and begged her to forgive him. He promised to be faithful and to never again take money from her account without asking first. Mo might even have believed him but it was Nabi, with better instincts about men's promises, who insisted that Mo get out of the relationship and move in with her.

“He’s using you,” Nabi had said over and over until it finally got through.

Three days after she ditched him, he ran off with a woman from the health club and with Mo's favorite garnet and diamond ring, the one her aunt gave her for her thirteenth birthday. Plus two thousand dollars missing from her checking account. She tried to track him down but without any real gusto. She never really wanted to confront him. She wanted to move on. She wanted to be smarter. She wanted to be able to trust someone again. She wanted to...

Drifting off, she was back on the train and he was there again. She lunged for him as he kept trying to tell her about his new life, his reformed life, in London. Where?

"New London," announced the conductor and Mo jumped from her seat.

Dash reached out to grab her before she hit her head.

"You were moaning in your sleep," he said. "Bad dream?"

"Not as bad as the reality," she said, hoping she had not revealed too much.

"You kept muttering the word 'rust'."

"I was trying to strangle someone but my fingers went all glooby."

"Okay, I think I don't want to know about that."

"You think right."

...

It took three more months for Perón to decide that the time was right to slip away.

In that time, he had followed orders, made his reports, and kept Navarro off his back. The secret service was splintering into factions that were themselves at war even as they waged war on the people of Argentina. There were power struggles and even killings to gain control within the government. The third man in the car on the night of the heist was found dead in a dumpster. Things were becoming more dangerous and the agents themselves were no longer safe from enemies within.

Navarro was insisting that they be more daring, take more risks. Move up in the world. Just what Perón did not want to do. In addition, rumors were spreading that members of the regime had robbed the National Museum and perhaps pulled off other capers. No one knew why. Perhaps, it was said, the junta needed the money. An American embargo was having an effect on the whole economy. Since the army was running things, the theory emerged that the government had organized the burglary for the purpose of selling the works to get money for clandestine operations. One journalist found a woman who claimed to have seen a certain car in front of the museum at the time of the heist. The journalist was never heard from again.

No formal investigation was ever mounted. For all anyone knew, the artwork taken that night had vanished as quickly and finally as your average citizen under suspicion might from his home one day. It was all just chatter and rumor at the cocktail parties of the rich that Perón would never have been invited to.

No matter.

His concerns were not political but practical. He saw a different life for himself than the one he was living in the shadows. And so, at the end of the day on an ordinary Wednesday, he took the usual bus home, bought a loaf of bread on his way, and walked into his apartment. From the tiny closet he took out a small mustard-colored suitcase that closed with a belt. Inside was a single change of clothes and some money that he had stashed away. He placed it on the bed. Then he reached underneath to retrieve the canvas bag in which he kept the painting of the young girl and slipped it into the suitcase. He

made sure his ID papers were there too. Without any hesitation or regret, he looked out the window to make sure that no one of any significance was outside on the street. Convincing himself that it was safe, he walked to the door.

Why did he pause there? Nostalgia? Second thoughts? Doubts about his own motivation? Perón was not used to questioning himself and he did not do so now. But that brief pause in the threshold of the doorway changed his future and there were many times later on when he wished that he had simply kept walking.

...

Mo's room at the Liberty Hotel on Charles Street had a very nice view of the river. A tour boat was chugging along and the March wind was whipping a flag nearby. The room had a bed, a settee, a desk, a small refrigerator, the usual trappings. It was painted in psychiatric beige, the color the studies called calming. But the curtains were the gentle and tingly red of that dress in the Vermeer painting of the girl with a wineglass Mo recalled. Like brandy on the tongue; not the taste but the rub of it. Color of an affair, she thought. Is that what she was getting into?

True to his word, and to prove that he was a gentleman, Dash arranged not only for them to stay in separate rooms but on separate floors of the hotel. When he called on her in the afternoon, he was a like a suitor without a suit. Shirt and casual jacket. She had on a gray silk blouse with a dark green scarf that felt to her like tapwater on the neck. It was casual enough but seeing him, she unconsciously unbuttoned the top button on her blouse to loosen the look.

On the bus to Chinatown, they followed the directions they were given by Blaise Norman and found a storefront on Beach Street with a sign in the window that seemed to read *Lung Spots*. But this turned out to be bad spacing on the lettering because the store was owned by Lung and filled with snazzy pots and dramatic ceramics. The man who met them was right out of central casting for the role of the natty but suspect foreigner with dubious motives. He was bony and taut and wore an ascot. His lips were thin and purple. He even had a holder for his e-cigarette. He introduced himself as Jong Lung Wan and commented on the store name himself.

"I ought to get that fix," he said. "Lung's Pots, you know." He had a slight accent as though tutored by an acting coach to sound vaguely Mandarin for effect. "We get about four *caucies* a week – I mean, you know, white folk – who think they can get lungs x-rayed here."

"Ha," Mo said, meaning just the opposite.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Mr. Lung..."

"Call me Wan. Everyone call me Wan. Represent some of Boston best young artist and potter, especially in Chinese tradition."

He picked up a vase in a color that reminded Mo of the Marvel comics logo when she was a kid. Blaring red of the superheroes, punch in the skull.

"See?" Wan said. "Porcelain style from Qing dynasty. But modern shape, right? You interested?"

When he was not trying to sell something to *caucies*, Wan spoke perfectly fine English. He only dropped his plurals and tenses to sound like his own idea of Chinese movie talk. He thought it made him, and by extension his wares, more exotic.

“We’re interested in a Renoir,” Mo said.

“I’m not knowing him. Is he local?”

“You have a painting we need to see.”

“Ah! That Renoir! You the people Blaise sent. Sorry, I did not realize. Please come into back office and make yourself comfortable.”

They followed him down a long hallway to an office that would have worked for a movie producer just as well. There were piles of documents and screenplays on chairs, stuffed file cabinets, a few posters for Chinese films on the walls. There was even an Oscar statuette on a shelf but it was peeling and clearly bogus.

“Ah yes, I’m film producer too,” he said. “We do kung-fu mix with romance comedy. You interested?”

Their expressions answered in the international language of *give me a break*.

“Okay,” he said, dropping the linguistic sham, “so you’re not here to be impressed by me. I get it. But the painting is a different story, right? Let me bring it out to you.”

Wan jumped up and quickly disappeared into another room, leaving his e-cigarette vapping in a green Tang plate.

...

Something wrong about the suitcase stopped Perón at the door.

Not the weight of it or the heft of it but something intangible. The way a dent in fate can strike one as a kind of ping in the gut. Unmeasurable but unmistakable too.

Carefully, and praying that he was wrong, Perón went back into the room and placed the suitcase on the bed. He opened it and took out the canvas bag. When he opened that, his heart skipped a beat and the ping turned into a twinge. What he found inside the bag were a few pieces of thin cardboard, the kind they used at the local stand to pack fruit.

No painting.

Stupidly, he closed the bag and opened it again, hoping for a different outcome. But it was the same, of course. The painting was gone.

Perón in a panic searched the room, which was absurdly small and only had three pieces of furniture in it. Still, he looked through the closet, all around the floor, in and behind the dresser, and under the bed a number of times. It was comical but he was not laughing. It was also useless. It took him many minutes to understand that his little girl had been kidnapped; the robber had been robbed. How could it happen? No one knew about her and no one would have burglarized his apartment because there would be nothing to take. It took even more time for Perón to realize that it had to be Navarro. He must have suspected all along – or perhaps had even seen him take it that night – and then found the right time to slip in and steal her. Why he had waited all this time was anyone’s guess.

But what to do about it?

Confronting the thief was pointless, of course. Perón had no proof. He had no rights over the painting in any case. And if challenged, Navarro would simply deny it or, worse, admit it and then have Perón taken care of. It was the perfect crime against an imperfect criminal. His little girl was gone and there was nothing he could do about it.

Perón would have cried then but his tear maker had long ago dried up. Life in Argentina had that effect. Instead he sat down on the bed and held his head, waiting for the pain to pass. He waited a very long time. At some point much later, he took his

suitcase in hand and went to the threshold again. This time he walked through it and down the street to the station on his way to stay with relatives in San Justo. He never even returned to the SIDE to resign. Instead, he simply intended to vanish from the city, to become his own Disappeared.

There was nothing for him in that place and no *him* there either. In his mind, there was no Fernando Perón left behind. Ashes of a ghost perhaps, scattered by a whisper. Nothing more.

...

Wan brought the painting out from the back room as though delivering one of the crown jewels or perhaps dinner to a crown prince. It was lying on his upturned hands and he was walking slowly so as not to spill or drop it. He placed it on the table the way a Buddhist monk would set down a lotus blossom, with great mindfulness. Then he took two steps back to give it some air.

Perhaps it really did strike him as some kind of jewel but to Mo it looked most like just what it was...a small oil painting of a girl, nice enough to hang in the den. Except that she had no den. The familiar signature of Renoir – the broken R, the squiggly lines, the dash over the i – was at the lower left in blue. They all studied the canvas for a few moments in silence. Then Dash spoke:

“Okay!” he said brightly. “I’d like to shoot it outside in the sunlight.”

“Is that necessary?” Wan asked. “Perhaps in here instead, right?”

“Natural light would be much better for the color balance.”

Dash had brought his Nikon D5300 and a black cloth for the background. Not an archival setup but good enough to produce a decent record. He set up the shoot in the lot behind the store with Wan fussing and hovering like a nervous daddy the whole time. One of the images caught Wan’s shadow over the girl, which struck Mo as ominous.

When they were done, Wan returned the piece to a cabinet he kept in a room behind the office. He asked Mo and Dash to sign some papers saying that they had seen the work in person and that it really was a painting and that it in fact bore a signature that read “Renoir.” As he was not asking them to verify the claim that it was actually created by Renoir himself, they both agreed.

“Shouldn’t you have it in a vault or something,” Mo asked.

“I will. Exactly, right? Move it to bank vault. Nice and safe. For now, no one knows it’s here. Unless you tell.”

They all laughed at this even though it was not particularly funny.

“Blaise vouch for you,” Wan said dramatically. “So I not nervous.”

On the way back to the hotel, however, Mo was still rattled about the whole business.

“This is very weird,” she said. “A pretty elaborate arrangement just to get two amateur decisions.”

“Elaborate and expensive,” Dash said.

“So you’re suspicious too.”

“Yes. No. Maybe. I still think it is just about building a consensus. What did you think about the painting?”

“I haven’t seen that one but it looks like other ones I’ve seen. Renoir painted a lot of girls. The color palette is similar in the range and hues. Seems right I suppose.”

“What about the signature?”

Mo closed her eyes for this and scanned all the signatures she had seen in the way an imaging software might scan a hard drive looking for patterns. The signature was a scrawl of color to her that felt like holding steel wool in her palm, which meant that she could recall it perfectly.

“It matches the ones I’ve seen.”

“So let’s say it’s a real Renoir, not a forgery. What do you think a painting like that is worth if it’s authentic?”

“No clue.”

“Well I looked it up. It’s anywhere between say \$100,000 and \$70 million.”

“That’s a big between.”

“There are a lot of Renoirs around, which is bad. But this one is very pretty and that’s good. It’s quite small, which doesn’t help. But it has just come to light, which does help. If some rich person wanted it bad enough, it could be worth a fortune. If two people wanted it, you could have a bidding war. See?”

“Not at all.”

“Welcome to the world of high priced art. It’s not about the art of the work, it’s about a thing that people want to possess.”

“Did you notice something odd about it?”

“I noticed that it wasn’t framed.”

“That’s true. It was just mounted on the stretchers. Why would that be?”

“No idea.”

“And what about that small drop of red at the lower right edge?” she asked, and again closed her eyes to better isolate the color from the fury of the world. “It was a slightly different red than the rest of the painting. Not that kind of vermilion like in a Titian, that’s made from powdered cinnabar. Dusty feeling. No, this drop was different. More like blood-iron red in a vial from some guy with oily skin. Slippery. What was that all about?”

“What drop of red?”

...

Time passed for Perón and for Argentina too.

He had managed to live quietly and undetected away from Buenos Aires, working as a dishwasher in the local family restaurant and seducing some of the local girls. If Navarro or anyone else was looking for him, they never showed up. The world was changing and there were bigger problems to deal with.

By 1983, the junta had been voted out of power and the era of the Dirty War was over. The new president, Raúl Ricardo Alfonsín, was democratically elected to undo the offenses of the old regime and life in the county brightened. The old secret service units were disbanded. But the country was still reeling from a recession brought on by the military years and the embargo by the United States. It was difficult to save money then and therefore Perón could not bring himself to actually leave Argentina as he had planned to. He did, however, have a new apartment, a new start, and he was looking for better work.

In the papers one day, searching for a job, Perón noticed a tiny report about the theft of a number of art works from a museum in Rosario. It was an article most readers skipped;

there were more important stories in the news. Perón himself only vaguely skimmed it but one thing stood out...the museum in question was being expanded. The thieves had entered through the construction site in the back. This fact convinced Perón that his old partner was at work again, using the methods – if you could even call them that – practiced during the era of the junta. This time, perhaps, not under orders but for his own benefit.

Without the protection of the service, Navarro would be more vulnerable than before. It occurred to Perón, slowly rinsing some *Chimichurri Rojo* from a dinner dish, that the chance to confront the man who had taken his girl was being offered to him. On a plate, as it were.

Perón still had a friend in the government – an ex-lover in fact – who was willing to give him Navarro’s address. One day Perón took the bus from his town to the city of Rosario and on the way, concocted his plan. He would confront Navarro about the Rosario heist and threaten to turn him in unless he was given back his Renoir, assuming that Navarro still had it.

Knowing the tall man as he did, Perón assumed that this would not go smoothly. For that reason he took with him the pistol he had kept from his time working for SIDE. He had never actually used it and had no idea if it even worked but as he fondled the grip in the pocket of his jacket on the bus, he felt sure that it would help him make a good case for himself. If it came to that.

...

Back in Mo’s room at the hotel, Dash ordered up for an afternoon tea. Mo was sitting on a small couch by the window staring out at Boston. If she had realized that it was a love seat, she would not have sat down in it. Dash watched her with the eye of a photographer. Her profile was perfect. The light was catching her skin in a way that made it glow and brought tints to her dark hair. He thought to get his camera to capture it but quickly saw that this might ruin the moment. So instead he walked over and sat down next to her.

When she turned to look at him, their eyes connected and mingled impressions. They might have kissed at that moment. They were certainly close enough. Their breathing was even in sync, surely a sign of something brewing. They paused there on purpose so as not to rush in. But that short sweet distance between pairs of lips had collapsed into a quantum hole that sucked them closer. They both felt the pull and were both ready for the leap. They both leaned forward.

The knock on the door broke the bond.

A young man entering with a rolling cart quickly turned the romantic mood into a transaction. Dash, for his part, saw this interruption as a different kind of sign. A warning sign. Something had been bothering him, something unsaid, and it occurred to him that this might cause problems down the road. Here was a chance to change that. And so, smart or dumb, as soon as the bellboy left, he took that moment to confess it.

“You know,” he said, standing at the cart to pull back as far as possible from his own yearning, “I have to admit something to you.”

“Yes?” she said, hoping for the best, even though that rarely panned out.

It was not going to this time either; she could see it in his posture. Like someone bracing for a blow. Or preparing to deliver one. No, not the best at all.

“I wasn’t exactly honest with you when we first met.”

She sat back on the cushion. The kissing gap was gone and in its place there was a jerky inertia in the wrong direction.

“No?” she said.

“We didn’t actually meet by accident,” he said.

“No?” she repeated.

“I mean, I didn’t find out about you and your talent for images online as I may have suggested in that first email.”

“Not suggested,” she said. “Said. You said you read about me online.”

“Yes, well, you see...I did but...”

A stinking in her nose told her that these hesitations were the way the truth had of reeking through a fish story.

“How then?” she asked.

“When Blaise Norman first contacted me about the Renoir, she specifically asked if I knew you and could get you involved.”

“Me? I never met her before. How did she know about me? Online?”

“Not exactly.”

“I’ve never had anything to do with her before. Or with Renoir. Or with you, for that matter. Or any of this. Why me?”

“Yes, well, um, you see...”

...

One thing about Navarro was clear right away. He was not living large.

His apartment was a dingy room on a crummy street. The trash in front had not been picked up in weeks. There were rats at the curbside. The door to the building had been bashed in. One of the windows to the front was shattered and covered with an old wet bathroom rug.

Perón went into the building, which smelled like a dead toilet, and found the tall man’s apartment on the first floor. The door was ajar and so he simply walked inside. No one was home and he took this opportunity to snoop around. There was barely any furniture, not even a bed, just a mattress on the floor. All of Navarro’s stuff, whatever it was, was still in two cardboard boxes and one valise lying on the floor. Perón looked through them but found only junk and some sad old clothes in need of washing.

“Find what you’re looking for?” said a voice at the door in Spanish.

Navarro was as tall as always but thinner, which did not soften his demeanor one bit. He looked like someone from a horror movie who ate people to stay alive.

“I know you took it,” Perón said. “Where is it?”

“If you mean that stupid little painting you stole, I no longer have it.”

“Look Navarro, I know you were involved in this theft at the museum here in Rosario.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yes. And I am sure the local authorities would love to hear about it.”

“You are?”

“But if you give me the painting, I’ll leave and not say a word.”

“*Andate a la mierda,*” Navarro said, but quietly.

Not as a curse but as a simple statement.

There being no chair at all, Navarro collapsed on the floor with his back to the wall. His boots were muddy and his jeans old and torn. He took a gun out of his jacket pocket and placed it between his spread legs on the floor. This might have been meant as a threat, but the tall man looked so gaunt that it seemed more likely that the gun was too heavy in his pocket.

“*Dejame de hinchar las pelotas, amigo.* I told you, I do not have it. Our little assignment at the National was three years ago. Do you think I would keep it that long as...what? A souvenir of our glory days?”

“Where is it then?”

“What is so important about it? This one painting you stole on your own? Is this your claim to fame?”

“That is not your business. I want it back. That is all you need to know.”

“It can’t be worth so much for you to make this pathetic trip. Or can it?”

“I told you, I just want it. It was mine and I want it back.”

“Yours! The rich steal from the artists and the museums steal from the rich and the governments steal from them all. Everything is stolen from someone, *colega*. Yours?”

Navarro laughed until he coughed. Seeing that this was going nowhere, Perón put his hand on the pistol in his jacket and his finger on the trigger.

“I ask you one more time,” he said, not knowing if he had the nerve to push the matter. “One more time. What did you do with the painting of the girl with the red bow?”

...

“I don’t know. Honestly,” Dash said. “I don’t know why she asked for you. I had never met Blaise before. But she insisted. Then I looked you up and found out that you had been hired by museums a number of times, so it made sense.”

By now, Mo was on her feet in order to stand as far away from him as possible in that small room. Any lip gap they might have shared had now become a mighty chasm.

“Blaise asked you to contact me?” Mo asked, not quite getting his point.

“Yes. She said her partner advised her to. More like insisted.”

“Wan insisted? I don’t know him either. What is going on here?”

“Not Wan. He’s her business partner. I mean her life partner. Her boyfriend I guess. A man she lives with. That’s what she told me.”

“What are you talking about? Someone she lives with in Texas said to hire me? I’ve never been to Texas,” she said, although from the psychic distance she was creating, she might just as well have been there now.

“No, no,” Dash tried to explain. “Blaise is from Texas but she lives in Florida.”

“I don’t go to Florida either.”

“Look Mo, I don’t know what it all means. I’m just telling you so that we don’t have any secrets between us. Blaise Norman runs a charity with Wan, who owns the painting. She contacted me because of the gallery. She also lives with a boyfriend in Florida who told her to get you involved in this.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. No idea. But she told me and so I asked you. No harm meant. You see?”

“Not really. What boyfriend?”

“Maybe you know him? He sure knows about you. His name is Mark Pierce.”

Mo happened to be turning away from Dash when he said this so that he could not see the expression on her face. This was a good thing because it was not pretty. The soft glow had turned into a glower and the muscles in her face had wrenched, turning her into a grim beauty. In contrast, her body language was exactly like someone who had just been hit on the head with a brick, flinching and stiffening at the same time.

“No, she said.

Quietly.

Much too quietly.

Then no no no no no and finally...NO!

...

If Navarro noticed Perón moving his hand into his jacket or guessed what he was holding in his pocket, it did not seem to bother him in the least. His own gun was lying on the floor in front of him but he made no move to pick it up. Finding this lack of intimidation slightly embarrassing, Perón pushed his gun forward, pointing the barrel at Navarro through the fabric. Still getting no reaction, he gave up the tactic and released his grip. He sat down on the floor opposite the tall man.

“If you longer have it, then what difference does it make? Just tell me where it is,” Perón said.

“How should I know?”

“I know you took it from my apartment. So what did you do with it after you took it from me?”

“I found a buyer for it.”

“Who was that?”

“Some Chinese who had done work with the Colonel.”

“The Colonel?”

“The man we turned the other works over to. The one we called Mr. White. The paintings from the National Museum were sold to the Chinese government.”

“Chinese? Why?”

“I have no idea why. Like you, I only did what I was told to do. But the other work, the one you pinched, that was for me. I found someone connected with the original exchange and I contacted him about it directly.”

“He bought it from you.”

“Yes,” Navarro said proudly. “He gave me a couple of thousand for it.”

“A couple of thousand?” Perón gasped. “*Boludo!*”

“You’re the asshole, Perón. I saved your ass.”

“Is that so?”

“Do you know what the Colonel would have done to you if he found out you were holding out on him? I did not tell him. I took the work and sold it. I did you a favor.”

“Okay then, who was the man you sold it to? What was his name?”

“I have no idea. He was a Chinese. They all sound the same.”

“Find the name.”

“*Más difícil que cagar en un frasquito.*”

This was a joke in street slang that suggested finding the name would be harder than taking a large crap in a tiny jar. Peron did not find it amusing but then neither did Navarro who simply stood up, leaving his gun on the floor, and walked over to the

window. He pulled the rug aside and dust filled the air, making him look like a specter in a cloudy aura. He said nothing and did not move, a signal that the interview was over. At that, Perón stood up too, still not sure whether to shoot the tall man for stealing from him or congratulate him for winning their stupid little game.

“You think the police care about me?” Navarro asked. “You know nothing, Perón. I am no one. I do the job I am told to do. Do you see me living here in luxury? Your painting is gone, they all are. We are not master criminals, *amigo*. We are roaches struggling to eat. Move on with your life before someone squashes you.”

“Is that a threat?”

Navarro snorted.

“I have nothing to threaten with. I am nothing. Just go and leave me alone.”

Across the street from Navarro’s building there was a poorly kept cemetery. For reasons not clear to him, Perón was drawn there as he left. He stood among the gravestones feeling dead. Looking back he could see Navarro’s contour still at the window, all bone and skin. He was right, Perón thought. Whatever made him believe that the delicate little girl with her sweet red bow was his to have in the first place? He was no artist or collector or man of means. He was, as Navarro said, a roach that had crawled across a lovely terrain made of oil paint that whispered about a child with pale skin.

But now it was time to let go of all those fancies. It was time to move on. Perón kicked a small rock in such a way that it hit one of the headstones and made a scratch in the surface. Like crossing something out. His way of saying goodbye to his lost love.

...

“Mark Pierce,” Dash said plainly as he tried to calm her.

But the name was like a second brick hitting the same bruise and Mo flinched again.

Dash kept talking for a long time, trying to smooth things out. More explanations that explained nothing. In fact all his words were having the opposite effect, each one another count in what Mo now saw as a conspiracy against her. She had started pacing, a slow caged pacing, and holding her arms tightly across her chest as if she was trying to protect herself. She was seeing red at that point. At least it felt that way. A harsh and hollowing red that she had seen on a painting on silk from the Han Dynasty in China. A color called *rubia*, a red dye made from the madder plant. Madder. That was exactly right.

Dash kept talking but she did not hear. She was barely paying attention to what he was saying but she did catch one more sentence. Dash was explaining that Mark Pierce, besides being a boyfriend, also advised Blaise on financial matters connected to her foundation.

“I’ll bet he does,” Mo said, slightly spitting. “Advises her all the way to his bank.”

“So you do know him,” Dash said, thinking that this made things better.

It did not.

“Of course I know him,” Mo snarled. “Only too well. I wish I didn’t.”

“Oh I see. So he’s a what...he’s a former lover.”

“Oh god.”

“An ex-husband?”

She could not bring herself to even say his name at this point and simply used the pronoun as a curse.

"*He*...is my father."

"Your father? That's great. No kidding!"

"I wish I was."

"So Kline is your married name?"

"No, it's *his* married name. One of them."

"I don't understand."

"And you never will. He's the Son of Scam," she said and started chewing on a hangnail, a bad habit she had broken years ago.

"He seemed nice enough," Dash said casually, but luckily Mo was so furious she did not even hear this, only the name Mark Pierce echoing in her anger.

"What is it with me?" she said out loud, thinking she was only thinking it. "Why am I always attracted to liars?"

"I wasn't lying exactly..."

"It's *him*, that's what it is. It's all his fault. He poisoned my DNA, genes all twisted and distorted."

She snarled her fingers to demonstrate the idea. Dash thought to put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her but by the time he moved towards her, Mo was already at the door and, in her mind, out of her room, out of the hotel, gone from Boston, and on her way to Florida to untwist the knot of her genetic noose.

The notion that she would have to actually get on a plane to do it never entered her mind. Rage was a fine cure for fear.

FIVE

“A thimbleful of red is
redder than a bucketful.”

Henri Matisse

On an otherwise ordinary morning in March of 1986, Fernando Perón got an unexpected call from his uncle Marco de Solis. The two men did not have a close relationship in spite of the fact that they were related. They had only talked a few times during “the Process” and avoided any mention of their work for the government. De Solis, for his part, did not see his duty as obeying this regime or that, but only in protecting his fellow *porteños*. This included his nephew, for whom he felt responsible since the death of the boy’s father. He had helped him get the job at SIDE only to shield him. But he did not at all want to know what he did there.

The call was tense. There was no small talk, no gossip. No family chitchat. De Solis had something on his mind and he got right to it.

“Fernan, have you gotten a notice of appearance?”

“A what?” Perón asked.

“Notice of appearance. Official notice to appear before the board of inquiry.”

“What board? What inquiry?”

“The board looking into life during the Dirty War. They are investigating civil rights abuses and other matters.”

“No, I have not heard a thing about that.”

“Perhaps you should prepare yourself.”

“In what way?”

“You never told me what you did as a member of the secret service, Fernan. I suppose this is something I do not want to know.”

“*Eso es verdad, tío. Tal cual.* You do not want to know.”

“Yet this board of inquiry might want to know.”

“I did nothing terribly bad.”

“Good. Because all the rumors suggest that...”

“Those were other units, uncle, not mine.”

“I have been called down to speak to them. But perhaps the names of those in the secret service are still...well...a secret.”

“Why does this board want to talk to you?”

“Various police matters. I have been gathering files all morning.”

“Your police matters were not political though.”

“All matters in Argentina, then and now, are political, Fernan.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“They will ask me about arrests for example. Those we arrested and held in custody.”

“You mean tortured.”

“No, Fernan! The army did that. I mean people we arrested and released for lack of evidence. Many many people.”

"I do not understand, Uncle Marco."

"Good. They will also ask me about those not arrested."

"Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I heard the news that there never seemed to be enough active policemen to carry out the junta's wishes."

"Yes, I did not follow the letter of the law, shall we say."

"You did not stop the marches."

"I did what I could to protect those women. These were our mothers, after all. But perhaps now this will be seen as a good thing."

"Yes, perhaps."

"And they will ask me about the *Bellas Artes*," de Solis said, almost as an afterthought, although it was first on his list.

"The Fine Arts Museum?"

"No harm in telling you. It is mere history now. There was a burglary at the National Museum of Fine Arts. This was back in 1980. A number of works stolen."

"Yes, I know."

"You do?"

"I have heard the rumors. And they are looking into this now?"

"Perhaps."

"But why? Why now?"

"It is an unsolved crime, precisely so. The works were never recovered; the criminals never pursued. They will no doubt want to know why."

"You say never pursued. You mean the criminals were never caught, don't you?"

"Well...both. We were quite sure who they were. We simply did not go after them. For political reasons, you see?"

"No, Uncle Marco, I do not see. What exactly do you mean?"

"Never mind all this, Fernan. The less you know, the better. In that way if you are called before the board, you have little to tell them. And therefore little to account for. You see?"

Perón did see, quite clearly, that one's actions become a story that, sooner or later, demands to be told. Sooner or later.

...

The man who answered the door to the Miami Beach condo at first glance could have passed for any retiree living in the sun. He was nearly bald, thin, slightly tanned, and his scrawny neck made him look like a turtle out of its shell. A closer inspection would reveal that the tan was a tad too bright, chemical not natural; that the fake Vacheron watch was too huge to be useful; that the gold chain around his neck was a bit too thick, gaudy not glitzy; and that the smile was somewhat of a smirk that might be hiding something. In other words, he did not simply make an impression, he was working hard to construct one.

Instead of hello, Mo pushed past him and stormed into the living room.

"So, is it still Mark Pierce today?" she snapped. "Or have we shed that skin by now?"

"Nice to see you too," he said following her in. "Mark Pierce has a nice ring. And it gets away from the whole Jewish thing."

“I thought you were proud of your Jewish heritage. Gangsters like Cousin Arnie Rothstein.”

“A genius that man. He practically invented horserace fixing. Invented! You don’t like Mark Pierce? I’ll change it.”

“As usual.”

“You have to be flexible, Mosa. I always told you that. Besides, a name by any other name is just another name.”

“Makes singing Happy Birthday a real challenge.”

“Is it my birthday?”

“I have no idea. Do you?” she said.

Mo plopped down on a large IKEA couch that mimicked style without actually having it while her father went into the kitchen to get a pitcher of iced tea.

“Look at you, for instance,” he shouted from the other room. “You were named for a great Jewish hero!”

This sounded to him like an apology.

“I know,” Mo said, “Morris Kessler. He was a bagman for the Amberg gang in Brooklyn.”

“He was small potatoes. I mean Moses. The man convinced an entire nation that God was a Jew. What a pair of matzoballs! Deeds are more important than names. I always told you. Tea?”

“No. Not names...Mark,” she said, trying to stab him with his own name. “Aliases. That’s different.”

He shrugged and poured her a glass anyway.

“It means you’re in trouble again,” she went on. “Didn’t you just get out?”

“That was months ago. Didn’t you get my card?”

“I don’t read Get Out of Jail cards.”

That struck her father as funny and his expression softened.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll survive,” he said.

“I’m worried about *me*.”

“Then consider yourself lucky. You really only have to remember one name.”

And having rehearsed this bit together for years, they said the name in perfect unison: “Dad.”

...

Perón, as it happened, was never summoned to appear before any board of inquiry. By that time, bigger offenders had been snared...like the man known to him as Mr. White. His account, along with other officers in the army, and their subsequent punishment, satisfied the country that the days of the junta and the army and the police state were history. Time to move on.

Any matters disclosed, or discovered, by Perón’s uncle Marco during the inquiry were never discussed and the whole issue of the unsolved heist at the museum faded into legend and family tales told over holiday dinners. The artwork was gone, the reasons for the heist buried in far worse acts of national scandal.

Life did in fact improve in Argentina. The Alfonsín Era, the Menemist Decade, the De La Rúa Presidency. The shifting sands of nationalism, corruption, socialism, privatism. But through all this, Perón himself seemed stuck in some kind of unchanging past of

short-term jobs and instant girlfriends. Yet his view of himself was of a man with more substance than all that, more permanence. The young fellow who had loved art and dreamed of the sensual life had gotten lost in the troubled story of the country.

And so, at the age of 42, Perón packed up his meager belongings and left all that behind. He moved to Miami Beach where relatives had opened an Argentinean restaurant on Collins Avenue. He had new plans for himself now. He would work his way up there from dishwasher to host, learn a more refined English, and go back to his studies. Make something of himself.

Because he was handsome and Latino and seductive in his manner, his plans moved more quickly than even he imagined. He soon became the maitre'd at *El Secreto* and spent his time managing the restaurant and meeting and romancing some of the classier women of the neighborhood. Far from the secret life of a secret service agent, this open existence suited him. No drama, no dread, no hush-hush; except for the occasional affair with a married woman. It was all very simple and as neat as a table setting.

That is, until the moment a year later in 2001, when a story came to light in the papers back home that wrenched Perón out of his serenity and back to a fascination that had not dimmed with time. The headline that caught his eye read: "Missing Impressionist Works Reappear."

The article went on to explain that a man named Arthur Lung, a Taiwanese timber merchant, along with his American associate named Gabriela Williams, was trying to sell sixteen Impressionist works on the open market. They were asking for a whopping \$350 million but it was the number sixteen that got Perón's attention. They had approached Sotheby's but the works were being challenged by the auction house and the National Museum of Fine Arts in Argentina was claiming that these were the stolen Santamarina pieces. Three of the works were being held under court order in a gallery in Paris until the matter could be resolved.

This news fit in precisely with what Navarro had said about a sale to the Chinese. It convinced Perón that the article was in fact referring to the works he and Navarro and the third man had taken all those years ago. He read the article over and over to make sure he understood it and to answer one question that was still unresolved. But the newspaper did not provide an answer. Where was *his* Renoir? Was it one of these works now in that Paris gallery or was it a missing seventeenth work that was not being reported?

Perón was just a restaurateur now but he had once traded in information and that was even before the Web turned everyone into a researcher. And so a new quest began to fill his spare time. By day, he charmed and seated patrons, by evening he dated his latest girlfriend, but by midnight he delved and probed and tried to follow the trail of the stolen works. He told his uncle about the development but nothing came of it. He tried to contact the Parisian gallery owner and others mentioned in the story but without much success.

Eventually, he got in touch with a reporter in Taiwan who was following the story of the stolen art closely. He told her that he was a collector who had a fascination with Renoir in particular. This was not entirely a lie. In fact he had owned – if that was the right word – a rather lovely work by the artist, a girl with a red bow, for a short period of time. He mentioned this in one of his emails, leaving out the smash-and-grab part. This led to some new information but not enough.

There was no definitive result but it seemed that his own Renoir, his little girl, was not part of this group under scrutiny. That was promising but it also meant that there was no way to find her either. Again he was at a dead end and once again he walked to a local cemetery and kicked a stone to signify a conclusion. But this time, the stone bounced back and hit him in the shin. He lifted his trouser leg and saw a drop of blood streaming down. Perón took this to be a symbol of his own passion emerging, and a sign from on high that he should not give up. That is when he came up with his plan.

...

To charm Mo out of her anger, her father led her out onto the small porch at the rear of the condo, overlooking an artificial lake. A flamingo statue by the water was a reminder to Mo that everything connected to this man was flimflam. He again offered her an iced tea, this time with a slice of lemon, but she rejected it as though it were poisoned.

“Why did you get me involved with this whole art thing?” she demanded.

“I thought you liked this stuff. You work for museums don’t you?”

“People hire me for my expertise. Not yours.”

“Why are you so suspicious all the time? Don’t you trust your old man?”

“Trust you? You, who missed my high school graduation...”

“Not that again. I was away on business. You know that.”

“You were doing time in Fishkill State Prison.”

“The business went south. What can I say?”

“That would be the counterfeit concert ticket business. It went south, you say?”

“We had a lousy business plan, so sue me.”

“I wish I could.”

“Calm down, Mo. I did this for your own good.”

“No kidding.”

“He seems like such a nice guy. You should be thanking me. Especially after that last jerk.”

“Nice guy? Who is?”

“Dashiell Wells. Very upstanding fellow.”

“You know him? He said Blaise told him to contact me.”

“Didn’t he tell you? That silly boy.”

“How the hell do you know him?”

“I met him in prison. I can’t believe he didn’t tell you that.”

The kind of steam that comes out of the ears of cartoon characters would not have seemed out of place as Mo stood with her back against the wall of the small porch and looked out at the flamingo. She envied it somehow. She took a deep breath, preparing herself for the truth which, in her experience with her father, also meant preparing for the worst.

“You met him in prison?”

“In prison, yes.”

“What was he in for?”

“Shooting.”

“A shooting?”

“Shooting,” he repeated and bounced his index finger in the air.

“Who?”

“The inmates.”

“He shot all the inmates?”

“Not all of them. About a dozen. Me included.”

“All at once?”

“No, one by one.”

“So he’s a serial killer.”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“How did he shoot them?”

“With a camera, what else. He’s a photographer, Mo. He was there shooting some of the cons for some kind of magazine thing. The New Face of Prison or something like that. But he never used my face...too pure he said.”

At that Pierce formed a snaggly, crooked smile that gained the confidence of so many marks before. Just not Mo, not anymore.

“Another great judge of character,” Mo concluded.

...

Fernando Perón may not have been swift in his actions but neither was he hasty. Only one time in his life had he done something impulsive and that was on the night of the heist. Otherwise he was methodical to the point of boredom. He made notes about the patrons at the restaurant to better greet them. He watched BBC television to learn better English. He examined old movies to improve his seductions. He kept a black book about his lovers’ habits. Now he set about finding his Renoir in the most meticulous way.

To pursue this plan effectively, Perón began to study. He had been an art history student a long time ago and this curiosity came in handy now as he took night courses at the local community college in art appreciation. He studied the Impressionists online. He even began subscribing to *Art Now* magazine to pick up some artsy lingo.

In a strange way, the more he read, the more this former kid from the streets of Buenos Aires, this government agent, began to identify with painters like Renoir. After all, they were outcasts too in a sense, and radicals violating the rules. Rather than the smooth surfaces and perfect edges of classical art, they boldly made their forms with strong brushstrokes of pure unmixed colors. Instead of the idealized light of the Renaissance, they tried to capture light in its changing qualities over object and time. And instead of biblical scenes or great moments in history, they captured ordinary life as it was lived in landscape and still life. If the works looked harsh – mere impressions, in the scathing words of the early critics – then it was the harsh truth of seeing splatters of color in the sunlit world. The truth of seeing. Was not Perón himself just such a radical in his refusal to accept the rules of law?

This was complete nonsense of course, the reasoning of thieves everywhere. But it convinced him that his now lifelong quest for the Renoir had deeper meaning than pure greed. He would search for her and find her because he was the only one worthy of her. The only one who understood her, who appreciated her. The only one who cared.

What his cousins at the restaurant, who spent their free hours drinking and playing Hold’Em poker, made of all this was hard to say. But they left him alone as one would a man hopelessly in love with an idol, who needs time and space to come back to his senses.

...

By 2001, Marco de Solis would have retired but for the banging of the pots.

The incessant sound could be heard throughout Buenos Aires that year. The economy of the country had finally collapsed after years of corruption, mismanagement, and the ever-shifting sands of politics left and right. With sixteen percent unemployment and one-third of the country living in poverty, an austerity program was put in place to resolve the national debt. A measure known as the *corralito* froze all bank accounts for twelve months, just after the rich were able to send their money abroad.

In anger, the people had taken to the streets, banging their pots and pans in protests that became known as *cacerolazo*. Banks and foreign-owned companies became targets of demonstrations that grew unruly. De Solis, on a day off and out of uniform, got caught up in one of these early on, as cops on horseback tore into the crowds, whipping the protestors, while others on motorcycles shot tear gas canisters. In the confusion, de Solis became just another protestor and victim of the brutality. As he held a handkerchief over his eyes and stumbled home, he knew that his time was past.

Throughout his tenure on the force, de Solis had managed to remain as detached as possible from injustice. Certain laws he followed to the letter, others he carefully ignored. He was a policeman serving the people, he told himself, not a lackey for the government. This had required a careful manipulation of procedures and paperwork. But this wily approach now seemed impossible. The city was in turmoil and de Solis had no stomach for confronting his fellow citizens. In his mind he was still trying simply to protect them from the criminals, a quaint view of policework in a nation torn.

But the financial collapse also threatened his own future and made his pension even more tenuous. So rather than handing in his retirement documents as he planned, de Solis filled out a health report in which he claimed to have a bad heart and asked for a transfer to a less stressful position. In fact his health was fine; the heart in question was bad from sorrow rather than sclerosis.

To honor his years of service, they accepted his letter and gave him a ridiculous job cataloging casework in the basement of the building where he formerly had an office with his name on the door. Yet this very demotion proved to have a silver lining because it gave him access to information that would become quite handy in a matter that still preoccupied him...the case of the stolen art.

...

Against her will to defy him, Mo began to drink the iced tea, thinking it might wash down the lump she felt in her throat. But it was undrinkable because her father had put too much sugar in it, his way of overstating his case.

“How did I get into the middle of all this?” Mo asked out loud.

She meant the remark as a cosmic complaint, about her whole life with him. But her father, ever the optimist as most con men are, took it as an actual question with a real answer.

“Through Blaise Norman.”

“And she is your...what? Girlfriend?”

“Isn't she something?”

“She’s something else.”

“I met her at a fundraiser for her charity...”

“Hoping to relieve her of the funds, no doubt.”

“In the beginning maybe. But it turns out we got along really well and I started seeing her. She told me her business partner had this Renoir painting...”

“Why is a woman who runs a charity in business with a Chinese gallery owner?”

“I didn’t ask. They wanted to authenticate the painting and I suggested that they start small. You know, build up confidence in it...”

“That’s why they call it a confidence game.”

“...with an archival photo. I told her I met this nice photographer who could take the picture. Then he told me about the museum he worked for and how they had doubts about that Dacoonie thing...”

“De Kooning.”

“Exactly. So I suggested that he get you involved.”

“Why me?”

“You’ve done that kind of thing before, right? Besides, he seemed like a nice guy. I want you to find someone to love. I have.”

“Blaise Norman?”

Instead of an answer, he patted his heart twice.

“Oh sure. Until the money dries up,” Mo snapped.

“Stop being so cynical. I was looking out for you. I always have been, despite what you think.”

“Fine. But where did this guy Wan get the painting from?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Renoir went to China. Like Nixon.”

“It can’t be that simple.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because you’re involved, Dad.”

“Come on, sweetie. I’m trying to make things up to you. You like this fellow Dash, don’t you? I’m like a matchmaker here. A *shadchan*.”

The word pimp, which was *not* Yiddish for matchmaker, made more sense when it came to mind, but Mo did not say that. Her anger was ebbing for one very simple reason. Her father really did seem earnest and sorry. Not just for this incident but for his entire life of cons and scams. In fact, he probably was not at all sorry and she knew this very well. But he had an irresistible skill in pretending that he was. At least in the short run.

“Doesn’t matter,” she concluded. “I saw the painting, Dash took a photo, we signed papers. I’m done with it.”

“Good. Done. Finished. Back to normal. Start again,” her father said, dusting his hands. “Oh, Mosa, sweetie, there is one more little thing...”

...

Four more years passed as the controversy over the stolen works played itself out in the courts. By 2005, the various parties concerned with the Santamarina works – the family, Sotheby’s, Arthur Lung and Gabriela Williams, and the governments of France and Argentina – had reached an accord. The three pieces in the possession of the Parisian gallery owner would be returned to the National Museum with great fanfare. The fate of

the other thirteen works would be discussed separately at a later time. It was a compromise no one was happy with but one that everyone accepted.

By this time, Perón had actually become quite knowledgeable about art, Impressionism, and Renoir. Without even knowing it, he had changed. He was 47 years old, no longer the young *gallito* working the angles. He had become the person he hoped to be: a connoisseur, a man of taste, a man, he hoped, finally worthy of that ageless innocent girl with the red bow, even if he never saw her again.

Perón contacted the reporter to express his outrage that the work was being taken from Lung, who claimed legal ownership of them. The reporter agreed, not so much to support the claim, but because she felt that the West was once again stealing the cultural treasures of the East. Perón commiserated, even though it made no sense to him since the work was European to begin with. Whether he actually believed this or not was beside the point. He was simply trying to get information. But with no further news about the Renoir, once again the trail went cold. Perón went back to his work, his habits, his seductions, not pursuing his little girl but never quite putting her out of his mind either.

Until one day in 2014 when, to his complete surprise, the same reporter contacted him. Her story was done; there was nothing new about the stolen art. Three of the works were back in the museum; the others were missing. But in the time that passed, she had come to know the family who claimed to own the work. Off the record, she hinted that they might have other art they might be prepared to sell if Perón was interested. He was. Perhaps, she suggested, there was a relative named Jong Lung Wan who lived in Boston and who might perhaps have other pieces of interest to the collector.

Perhaps.

Señor Fernando Guilado Perón, the art connoisseur, found and contacted Wan immediately.

...

When Marco De Solis finally did retire, just as the economy of the country began to revive, he was handed a small coffee cup with the logo of the *Policía Federal Argentina* on it, a nice blue shield against golden spokes, and a citation for his years of service. The citation mentioned his remarkable arrest record; more people jailed during his tenure than ever before. The fact that most of those arrested were released after a few days did not appear on the certificate.

His wife Carmina, so proud of his career, wanted to display everything in the living room for the rest of the family to admire when they came over. But de Solis was too modest for that. He kept the cup in the kitchen and was grateful for it because it was the right size to use for soup spoons. And because the citation annoyed him, he shoved it into a drawer in his bedroom and never looked at it again.

A white scarf in the drawer puzzled him at first. It seemed to be a kerchief of some kind but he had never known his wife to wear one. A gift from her sister perhaps? A mix-up of laundries? A misplaced cleaning rag? There was a mystery there but de Solis did not pursue it. He had something else on his mind that day as he buried the citation under the scarf and closed the drawer.

As Inspector in the Montserrat section of Buenos Aires he had solved his share of crimes, mostly bringing street hoods to justice for burglary and robbery. There had been any number of murders too, usually domestic violence cases or other crimes of passion.

None of that was mentioned in the citation. But all of it paled in his mind. There was one crime that still irritated him...the theft at the National Museum. Without doubt he had done the right thing by ending the investigation when he did. Once he realized from the presence of the green Ford Falcon that the secret service was involved, there was no point in continuing. Back then, the police worked for the Ministry of Interior, the SIDE worked for the Secretary of Intelligence, and everyone worked for the junta. Even if he had pursued it, nothing he discovered would have come to light. And if it had, it would have been covered up, or worse.

But it still bothered him.

Here was the sloppiest of crimes, pulled off by a gang of inept government employees, a bumbling break-in while two drunken guards slept. It was a national disgrace and a crime he could easily have solved. And so when he heard news from his nephew that several of the stolen works had come to light in the possession of a Chinese owner and were being contested in the courts, his interest in the case came flooding back.

He knew he could not change the past or even redress it. But he began to feel that if he could at least come to understand what had happened, the bitter taste in his mouth from it might dissolve. And now that he was retired, he had time to look into it. He also still had access to the case files section at police headquarters. And so, in his quiet casual way, he began investigating. The name Navarro immediately came up. It was a name he had heard before but only as a rumor. He was the leader of one of the teams within the SIDE, the kind of typical street thug that the junta used to hire. He lived now in Rosario and the fact that there had been another similar museum heist there soon after the National, suggested to de Solis that he might have been involved. With the junta gone, he was no doubt living the life of a small time crook like other former agents who had not ended up in prison or with their throats slashed.

Who else might have been involved or who ordered them to commit the crime or why...these were questions still to be answered. Even if he found out, de Solis had no intention of doing anything about this. He had a cat, a pension, a TV, his sweet round wife, and his fine citation in the drawer. No need to risk any of that. But like a thorough cop, he began to casually put together the story about what had taken place on his watch, the story of the one crime he might have solved.

There were still some mysteries there and when he came across them, he made some notes and stashed them in a file labeled *El Robo*. The theft.

...

"I'm being followed. I'm sure of it," Mo said the moment Dash picked her up at the airport.

"I missed you too," he replied.

They were heading for the terminal exit but Mo kept looking around nervously. It was an unusual move so Dash looked around too without any idea of what he was looking for.

"Yes, of course. That too," she said.

"What are we looking for?"

"Someone's following me. I saw him in Florida and on the flight. He was on my plane. And here in the airport."

"People do fly from Miami to New York, you know. You're not the only one. Why would someone be following you?"

“Someone who wants the Renoir maybe. Or doesn’t want us to know about it. Or is afraid we’ll find something out about it. Or...”

“What was the in-flight movie? Catch Me If You Can?”

“I didn’t watch it. I don’t watch movies. Too many colors to feel. Remember?”

“So how is Mark doing?”

“You mean Manny.”

“Manny? Who is Manny?”

“That would be my father, Manny Epstein. His real name, before he changed it about a zillion times to avoid one loan shark or another.”

“Epstein? So you were married?”

“Me? No. Why.”

“Your name is Kline.”

“It was the one name in his rap sheet that I liked. So I kept it. Anyway, he told me that he has a ‘personal interest’ in the Renoir. That’s Mannyspeak for he needs the money.”

“Do you have trust issues by any chance?”

“No trust. I worked for my money. And don’t give me that look. You lied to me.”

“No I didn’t.”

“You left out one little item in your story...that you met my father in prison!”

She turned around to catch her stalker but found no one.

“Oh that. I didn’t want to upset you,” Dash said.

“It didn’t work.”

“Look, I did meet your father – Manny – and then you and I met. That’s a good thing.”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t that the whole point?”

“The point is, this whole thing is getting out of hand. I don’t know who to believe anymore and this is actually getting dangerous. My father has been involved in some pretty shady deals with shady people.”

“He’s colorful. I thought you liked color.”

“Who knows who else is after this painting? Or what they would do to get it.”

They were outside the terminal at this point, Dash hailing a cab. She turned around again and this time thought she caught a glimpse of a familiar thick shape. But it was not clear enough to pin down.

“There was this man,” she insisted as she got into the taxi. “A big man in a too tight suit with a short blue tie. Brassy blue like someone flicking your ear over and over again. With no neck like a Botero figure...”

“Whoa! Slow down. We’re done with the whole thing, remember? We saw it, we took the photo, we’ll get the money. That’s it. Finito.”

“Yes. Finito you, finito me. I’m not so sure about finito Botero.”

As the taxi pulled away, a man looking very much like a Botero figure from the neckless collar to the shiny pointy shoes, stepped out of the terminal and tucked his blue tie back into his too tight suit.

...

To present himself in the best possible light to the man who might have his beloved Renoir, Perón decided to tweak himself. He had learned British English in his time in

Florida but now he practiced it with the subtlest of European accents to appear more urbane. He bought a nicer suit and examined himself in the mirror to make sure it looked impressive, tailored at the waist, fitting in the back. He got a haircut that made him look more distinguished. He wore glasses for thoughtfulness because it worked in some movie for Cary Grant. With all this in place, he called the man in Boston and introduced himself as Señor Fernando Perón, with a full rolling “r” in all three words, art connoisseur and collector.

“My cousin mistaken,” Wan said halfway through the phone call. “I am only in possession of a single piece. A Renoir.”

Perón held his breath, then took a deep one in order to propel the next question.

“Is it by any chance a small painting of a young girl with an innocent face but intense eyes, pale skin, and blonde hair? With a red bow hanging at the side?”

“You know this work?”

“Of course,” Perón said. Through sheer will and deceit, his voice was calm, almost nonchalant as he said this. But inside his heart was throbbing. “Yes. ‘Young Girl with a Red Bow’.”

“And you are interested in buying it, Mr. Perón?”

“I am very interesting in obtaining it.”

“You know I am asking 2 million dollars for it.”

“I see. How have you established that price? Are there other buyers?”

“We just beginning to show it,” Wan said.

This was a lie. He was in fact only beginning the process of verifying it. But if he could sell it quickly to a rich collector, so much the better for everyone.

“Do you have documentation for it? Provenance?” Perón asked.

“Yes, of course. But these are in China. I am not sure how easily I can get to them.”

Perfect, Perón thought. No papers meant that this was certainly the Renoir he took from the museum. It also meant that Wan could not sell this on the legal market. He would have to find a private buyer.

“I should like to see it for myself,” Perón said.

“If you want to come to Boston, I be very happy to show it to you,” Wan said, then joked: “And bring big fat checkbook with you too.”

There were a few more pleasantries as they set up a time and place. Like two patrons of the arts dealing with the higher matters of taste and beauty and commerce. Except that Wan was an outright phony trying to cash in on a stolen work of art and Perón had no intention of buying anything. This Renoir was his after all; he would simply have to steal it back. He had been a thief before, a notorious one even if no one ever knew his name. It was time to become one again.

Perón packed for a long trip since he would not fly to Boston. Instead he would take a bus to the train and the train to New Orleans, then another train to New York, then a third one to Boston. This trek would take 45 hours and cost more than an airline ticket. But this was the only way he would come up with to be able to take his gun with him.

SIX

“Color is everything, color is vibration
like music; everything is vibration.”
Marc Chagall

Blaise Norman was moving things along fluidly, at least in her own mind. Building a dossier, amassing opinions, creating momentum. She had already made some calls and was now trying to convince her anxious partner over the phone that everything was going according to plan.

“We’ll need that little old authentication to get moving,” she said.

“Ah yes. Need expert in field,” Wan said.

“I have the name of someone and he lives right up there in Boston.”

“How you know this guy?” Wan asked cautiously.

“Now Wan, you have to trust me,” Blaise said.

“Don’t trust anyone. That’s why you trust me.”

“All right. I know a photographer who works with some museums in New York. He asked the director of one of them, a woman named Campion, to recommend a Renoirist.”

“A what?”

“The Renoir expert.”

“Ah. Ren-war-IST.”

“I contacted him and set up a time for you to take the painting over. His name is Ervine Crispus. If we can get a document from him stating that, in his view, this painting is authentic, we can move right along. Okay?”

“Yeah sure. Okay.”

Okay was usually Wan’s way of getting off the phone when he did not want to discuss something. The cousin who gave him the painting had been calling from Taiwan to find out what was happening. The sale was supposed to bring funds to the family, not to Wan and his American partner. Wan had okayed all those calls.

He did not like the idea of showing the painting to anyone who was not a potential buyer. He was focused only on getting the money for it. Yet he knew that Blaise Norman was right and that they had to prove the painting was really by Renoir in order to convince a buyer. So this time, okay really meant okay.

The following day, Wan arrived at a brownstone on K Street in South Boston. A small metal plaque to the right of the front door read E. Crispus. It took a few moments for Wan to realize that he had to twist the head of the metal lion to sound the doorbell. That was a bad sign. It was the Chinese year of the horse and in Wan’s warped view, lions ate horses for lunch.

When Ervine Crispus himself answered the door, Wan immediately felt put off by him. The bad comb over was bad enough but there was also something off-kilter about

the handshake too. It was not firm yet the hand was thick and that gave it some heft. Wan held it for a moment the way one would guess the weight of a flounder, then let go.

The Renoirist introduced himself as *Ervine Crispus the Third* with great pomp, like a monarch rather than someone's grandkid. He was wearing a knit vest and a bow tie, which made him look both out of style and sync. This, Wan figured, was part of his persona as someone with an expertise buried in the past.

Crispus led Wan, holding the wrapped painting like a bag of money in his clutch, into a large visiting room at the front of the brownstone. There was a pile of art books on the floor holding an art deco lamp, and only a table and two chairs besides that.

"Then here we have it," Crispus said.

"We what?" Wan asked.

"The work in question. May I pry it from your desperate grip?" he asked, noticing the tendons popping in Wan's hand.

Instead of handing it over, Wan placed it on the table nervously and slowly removed the paper.

"You do tests? You have to test?"

"Tests?"

"I don't know. Infrared, ultraviolet."

"I am the test, my boy. The test kit is in here," Crispus said, tapping his temple. "The painting is not a collection of chemicals. It is the willful expression of an artist. An artist! Do you understand? And one that I happen to have studied my whole life. One I know as well as this hand."

Crispus held his thick mitt up for inspection, then used it to tamp down his hair.

"Shall we commence?"

...

As Wan unwrapped, Crispus placed one of the chairs in the center of the room and then another one facing it. When he sat down in the second one, the chair creaked under his weight. He put his fingertips together as a kind of blessing, then motioned for Wan to place the painting across from him in the other chair. Wan did so and expected Crispus to drop to his knees in order to inspect it closely. But the opposite happened. Crispus closed his eyes and kept them closed through many puffy breaths. Wan looked at him, then at the painting, then back at Crispus. Odd, he thought. Was he smelling the paint, listening for echoes, sensing the presence of the late great? Was he asleep?

Finally, just as Wan, standing dumb as a cow in the corner, began to doze off, Crispus popped open his eyes and gazed at the work. He studied it like that for a long time. The expression on his face was one of complete tranquility, as though the inspection took no effort at all. He might just as well have been watching a TV show about oil paint drying.

Here was a familiar subject, a young girl, with a familiar bow in her hair. Renoir was an admirer of girls, like Lewis Carroll, and he liked bows and ribbons too. There was that notable shimmer of brushstrokes, so tied to the painter, and that well-known palette of toned down colors, darker shades, brisk tints. It was a nice portrait but it was no seductive girl to Crispus, no pummeling collection of colors, not even a work of art worth some amount of cash. No, this was a test...a painting in the style of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 25 February 1841 to 3 December 1919. Renoir! The master of Impressionism! All the

elements were in place. Now there was only one response to have to it, only one question to answer about it. Was it authentic?

Eventually Crispus stood up, took two steps over to the other chair, then picked the painting up and tilted it towards the overhead light.

“You need magnifier?” Wan asked.

Not that he had one but he was wondering just what the expert was doing.

“These eyes you see in my head are my lenses,” Crispus explained without looking up. “This brain that you cannot see is my evaluator.”

“Yes I see,” Wan lied.

“You no doubt are curious as to my methods. Many people are. Let me simply say that I am not looking for what you expect. Signs of aging, like the crack pattern in the paint for example. Nor for the carbon content of the wood. All of that is for the little lab rats who dismiss my work so easily. NO! I am looking for the soul of Pierre-Auguste Renoir as he deposited pieces of it himself in this work of art. You see?”

Crispus cast his hand across the surface like a spell.

“No,” Wan admitted. “I no see. What you see?”

“Are you not an art dealer yourself?”

“Yes, yes. Art dealer. Local crafts.”

“Ah, yes. *Die Dinge*.”

He was saying “the things” in German and meant this as a put-down. Mere things. But it sounded to Wan like an imitation of a cash register, suggesting that Crispus assumed he made a lot of money. So rather than feel insulted, he grinned with pride.

“Yes yes.”

“Then surely you understand that artists – true artists – do not make objects that can be weighed and scratched. They create art that can only be absorbed, osmosed, inhaled.”

Crispus took a deep breath to illustrate the point.

“So is real, yes?” Wan asked, cutting to the chase.

“What you have here is without question a small oil painting of a young girl, very fetching, with a red bow in her hair...”

“I know. Girl with red bow.”

“You do not let me finish, sir! A small oil painting of a girl with a red bow in her hair that in my opinion, which in my opinion is the only opinion, is without question...”

At which point the doorbell rang.

With that perfect timing of a TV cliffhanger, the question lingered in the air of a cut to a commercial as Crispus raced to the front door.

...

That night Mo dreamed of red.

In a lifetime of dreaming about missing her bus on a dark crowded street or seeing that collie from the summer again and so on, she would not have thought it possible to dream simply of a color, of red. Yet she did. It was not a dream of things like red tape, red herrings, or red carpets. And not just a single red either, but all them.

All the reds of all the people who ever thought to make it, which was pretty much everyone everywhere. Throughout time, there have never been people who did not make stuff; there have never been people who did not make stuff red.

The Etruscans with their royal red, the Minoans and their proud red, the Pompeians with their robust cinnabar, the Ojibwa with their inner bark of red cedar, the Chinese with their redware pots. Taylor Swift's licky red lips, stop sign red, subtle as a warting, Coca-Cola red, magenta and yellow in equal parts, Pantone DS 75-1 C, like melted chocolate on the tongue. Red for passion or persuasion, courage or celebration, rank or revolution.

In her sleep behind closed eyes, she saw deepening reds from strawberry to scarlet to cardinal to vermilion to crimson to maroon to burgundy to ruby. Blood red, brick red, cherry red, fire engine red, oxblood red, pillar-box red, violet red, rose red, Venetian red, wine...

All the way to the reddest of all reds, different for everyone, but perfect in its redness just the same.

And then she dreamed of the red with no name, which is most of the red. Label all the reds from alizaron to zanzibar and come up with a few dozen words. Study all the paint swatches at the hardware store from Autumn Rose to Zenith Rising and find a few hundred names. But we can distinguish thousands of reds that we have no name for and this lack of imagination taunted her in the dream. An unnamed red for which the name red did not do justice.

Red.

It may have been the first color humans made and the first pigment isolated. It may be the last color anyone sees. Red is red but red is not red too. We all see red but we see it for ourselves alone, a private color, a personal hue. Close your eyes and imagine red and that red is different from mine or yours. And yet it is all the same, all red.

These ruddy thoughts swirled around in her dream, unclear and vague, a teasing of ideas with red at their core so that when she woke up, it was hard to focus her eyes at first. She felt exhausted and bruised from the effort at internal seeing because, of course, each color poked her in some way. She closed her eyes again before she got out of bed and in that moment saw the answer to a question she did not even know she had...about that drop of red at the bottom of the Renoir painting. She suddenly recalled reading that Renoir refused to use the new cadmium red that had just been developed and instead stuck to his familiar vermilion. You could see it in his tints, if you could look carefully enough and recall what you saw. Mo could and in this instant realized that the drop of red on the Renoir was not that. It was not part of his usual palette. This was a different red, just as familiar but not from powder mixed with oil. It was in a section very light with paint, more like a stain than a daub.

This red was a drop of blood.

Artists may suffer for their work but they rarely bleed on them. Therefore, this was the red blood of someone else, a thief perhaps, cutting himself as he smashed the frame when the painting was hanging in a gallery or a museum.

She awoke with a start, scratching her skin that was crawling with itches, her reaction to the red of the blood.

"Thief!" she shouted.

And then, as if someone else had said it, she nodded her head in agreement.

Okay, she thought, so the Renoir was stolen.

Now what?

...

“Lunch,” Crispus announced as he returned with a large bag. “Care to join me?”

“No,” Wan said. “Care too much to know if this painting is...”

But Crispus shoved the painting into Wan’s hands as he made room on the table to set out his food.

“Okay?” Wan said. “And...”

“And what?” Crispus replied, studying the delivery containers with more intensity than he had mustered for the painting.

“Renoir. Is real, yes?”

“Just as I told you.”

“You no tell me. You get lunch.”

“I didn’t tell you?” Crispus asked, probing the bag for something and not finding it.

“I wait for you to tell me. Still wait.”

“What?”

“Is real, yes?”

“That idiot forgot my spare ribs. Is no one paying attention to anything anymore?”

Wan stood by as Crispus went into his kitchen to call the restaurant to complain. The painting was getting very heavy in his hands but he did not move for risk of losing the moment altogether. Not to mention his own sanity. The fate of his gallery, his savings, his alimony payments, and his sick mother all rested on a single word from this impossible man.

Crispus returned and sat down at the table to wait for the missing food. Quietly, so as not to disturb a single molecule in the air, Wan, perfectly still, muttered: “Is real?”

“What? Oh that. Of course! Yes, it is absolutely an original work by the great Renoir.”

“Ah!” Wan said as though a great weight was lifted.

“Yes, absolutely,” Crispus said. “I will stake my reputation on it. I know, I know. I have said that before to great ridicule. But what do these chemistry majors know? I tell you, sir, I sense the spirit of the man, the flow of his intent from desire to brush, his impression of form on the canvas. The thin touch of thin fingers, the gaze of eyes that penetrate, the luminosity of a luminous spirit. And that white! That grayish white that could only be mixed by a pneumoniac! I know a Renoir when I see it! What you’ve got there is authentic and rare and Auguste right down to the signature. And I do not refer to the squirly ‘r’ at the end. I mean the *elan* of the inscription.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Wan said bowing to an emperor in his fantasy.

He had not followed a single word except the all-important *yes*.

“Yes, yes. My report and my bill will follow,” Crispus said, shooing him off. “Of course, you will be in for a bit of a shock, as most non-experts are who acquire Renoirs.”

“Shock?” Wan echoed.

“Yes because, you see, Renoir in his foolishness, used carmine lake for most of his portraits. And that fact has been causing problems even to this day.”

“She causing problems?” Wan asked.

But Crispus impatient was in no mood for chatter.

“Out, out! If you see the delivery boy on your way, please let him in. I am starving beyond the bounds of civil society.”

...

The deal Perón was after may have been about an Impressionist, but the art of the deal, as he and Wan both knew, was all about impressions.

It was the image of yourself that you placed in the other person's mind that clinched it. To convince the other man that each was serious but not desperate, they came at each other with full fakery. Wan pretended that while he hoped to sell the painting, he had many others interested and was in no rush at all to part with it. Perón, for his part, implied that while he was interested in buying the work, he had other paintings equally compelling to consider and was in absolutely no rush to get this one.

Behind the façade, either man would have killed to get what he wanted. Money for Wan, who wanted the Renoir off his hands as soon as possible; the girl for Perón who had no interest in any other painting of any kind.

Perón entered the gallery with an air of superiority, the way he imagined a wealthy collector would. Wan, who considered himself a great judge of character despite a lifetime of proof to the contrary, mentally measured the cut of the suit and the manner of speech and decided that this fellow could be trusted to cough up the cash. And now that he knew the Renoir was real, he felt no guilt about asking for his outrageous price.

Perón watched him intently but only to determine exactly how and where he kept the painting. He studied Wan as he walked through a door into a back room, opened a wooden cabinet, and took out something in a large manila envelope. When Wan returned, he placed it down on the desk between them with great pageantry and slowly took the item out of the envelope.

Seeing his little girl again, Perón did the best he could to hold back tears, and to stop himself from grabbing the piece and bolting out the door.

"Ah, I see you have emotion to this piece," Wan said.

"She is quite lovely isn't she."

"She?"

"The painting."

"Ah yes. Painting. Lovely. You a man of taste."

"I like to think so."

"And I am a good judge of character," Wan said proudly.

Not really, Perón thought, and then said: "When did you acquire her?"

"A choir?"

"When did you obtain this painting?"

"Few months ago. Been in family for long time. Now, need to move on."

It was hard for Perón to know in that instant whether what he felt was sorrow or joy. Maybe both. Sorrow because his little girl had been lost – to him, to the world – from the moment Navarro sold it until now. Lost for over thirty years! Who knew what grubby hands had pawed her or where she may have languished unseen. Yet there she was, back in the world, back in his life, and ready to be taken back.

"Very little security for such an important work. Is it safe here?" he asked.

Wan opened the drawer of his desk and brandished a gun. It looked more like a prop than an actual weapon. Grinning, he seemed to be acting out a scene from one of the grade D movies he had invested in as he twirled it on his index finger.

"No one knows about this work," he said. "No one even think that I have it. So it safe here. At least until the right buyer come and take it away."

Perón stood up formally and reached out his hand.

“I trust that I will be that person,” he said.

“For two million you sure as hell will be.”

“Let us meet again here in a few days after I contact my bank and discuss funds transfer, certified checks, and those kinds of matters. Does that meet with your approval?”

“Most sure, yeah,” Wan said, meaning the sooner the damn better.

The fact that neither man brought up the issues of ownership, provenance, or supporting documents encouraged them both. To Wan this meant his buyer did not care if it was stolen; to Perón it meant there would be no trail leading to him once he stole it again. They each left thinking they had found their dupe. This was another part of the art of the deal and, in fact, they were both right.

...

“What did he say?” Blaise Norman asked. “Please tell me you have a document of authenticity from Crispus.”

She and Manny were sitting next to each other at the kitchen counter with the phone on speaker, like an oracle before them. Nothing at first, then the word came through.

“He say yes. Renoir is real Renoir.”

Blaise pumped her fists in victory as Manny squeezed her breasts in triumph. Then he stood up and did a little jig, a paean to the god of instant wealth.

“And he’ll put that in writing?”

“He send me the document.”

“Fantastic boys,” Blaise said through both sides of her mouth. “Like cattle to the beef farm, we are on our way.”

“Have buyer too,” Wan beamed.

“You do?”

“Yes, met this morning.”

“How did you find him?”

“He find me. Through cousin in Taiwan.”

“Is he a hedge fund manager?”

“A wha?”

“Hedge fund,” Manny repeated. “These guys make zillions of dollars a year risking other people’s money. They don’t know what to do with all the cash, so they buy art. I mean they have their people find people who buy them art. It gives them class, which they wouldn’t know if they drowned in it.”

“Who is he?” Blaise asked, pushing Manny back into his chair.

“Name Fernando Perón. Art collector.”

“Is he rich?” Manny asked.

“Look rich.”

Seeing Blaise’s dubious glance and by way of explanation, Manny said: “The richer the better. The price of the art goes up because every rich guy wants to outrich the other guy.”

“How much did he agree to?”

“Two million.”

Blaise grinned wide but Manny gleamed like a man pumped by the money equivalent of Viagra.

“But expert also say maybe some problem,” Wan added.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Problem with what?”

“He say something about Renoir use Carmen Lake for portrait. She causing problem.”

“Who the hell is Carmen Lake?” Manny shouted.

“Dunno. Maybe she pose for portrait.”

“Fine, then she’s been dead for a century,” Manny said.

“Maybe her kinfolk want the picture,” Blaise offered.

“Kinfolk?” Manny repeated. “Great. And they can have it. Over my bloated carcass washing up on the beach at Boca.”

“Car kiss?” Wan asked.

“All right,” Blaise said. “Let’s all just calm down. We’ll figure this little old wrinkle out among us. No need to panic. Manny, be useful and go do some research. I’ll talk to you later Wan, hon, you did great.”

“There’s lots of Carmen Lakes in the world,” Manny said after checking online. “This can’t be the problem.”

“Maybe it’s not a woman, maybe it’s a place,” Blaise said, sending Manny on another chase through the web.

“Okay...there’s a Carmen Lake in Alaska,” he announced, “maybe Renoir went there and painted her.”

“So even if he did, what did Crispus mean? That the state of Alaska has dibs on the painting?”

“Call him and find out.”

“No, hon, we can’t risk that. We need the authentication from him. Let’s not mix things up right now.”

“Suppose this Carmen Lake suddenly comes forward to claim the painting?”

“Suppose the creek rises,” she said, a shorthand for saying don’t worry about it until it happens.

But Manny’s philosophy was the opposite because in his world, the creek had always already flooded the basement, the house, the town. The entire state was under water. He made a gurgling sound.

...

It took several days for Perón, staying in a motel near Lung’s gallery, to plan the break-in. Not because it was tricky but just the opposite. He spent that time convincing himself that it really would be as simple as it seemed. There was a rear door from the parking lot behind the building that could be pried open. There was no security camera in the back. The cabinet that Wan kept the painting in was locked but the door was wood and could easily be smashed. If he was no master thief, Perón at least considered himself to be a very lucky one.

One night as Wan locked the front door and walked home like a man with nothing to worry about, Perón went around to the back, jimmied the door, and found his way by flashlight to the back room. But he paused before opening the cabinet, wondering if this were a dream or reality. He last had the painting in his possession more than thirty years

ago. He and the little girl had taken separate journeys through the world. It was as though his own daughter had grown up and moved out. Was she really there now waiting for him on the other side of this thin wooden door, waiting to be taken back? Was she actually going to be his in a few seconds? Could it in fact be this simple?

Perón licked his lips to erase the dryness and tugged on the handle of the door. To his shock it swung open. Wan had not even bothered to lock it! What an idiot, Perón thought. What was he thinking? This way anyone could just come in and take it. Sure enough, there on the shelf was the manila envelope, unprotected, unguarded. With the flashlight in his mouth he pulled the painting out and saw his little girl again. Under the spot of the light he could study her as he had not been able to do days before with Wan watching him.

His hands were older now but she had not aged. His eyes had seen many more years, but hers were as innocent as ever. Fernando Perón was 56 years old and he was once more holding his true love in his hands. He dared not touch her skin for fear of ruining it but he held her silently for a very long time. Tears streamed down his face as he put her back in the envelope and vowed never to let her leave his sight again.

By the end of the week, Perón was back in Miami welcoming customers into the restaurant. Perhaps he seemed more buoyant in some vague way to those who had gotten to know him. Friendlier, happier. There was a new chef and if they got along well, that might explain it. Or perhaps the vacation in Boston had reinvigorated him. No one, of course, could have guessed that as he handed out menus and compliments and led people to their tables, he always knew in the back of his mind that his timeless little girl was waiting for him, in plain view, mounted on the wall over his bed, waiting to be noticed and admired, waiting to be loved. How many girls can hope for that? How many men?

...

Wan, who was bilingual in a way that could mangle both languages, managed to cover just about every curse word in both English and Chinese when he opened the gallery the next day.

“*Cào nǐ zǔzōng shíbā dài!*” he shouted as he stared at the empty shelf in the cabinet.

This was an unusually sophisticated curse for Wan...fuck your ancestors to the eighteenth generation! But it was also rather exhausting to keep up, and so he spent the next hour running between the front door, back door, and the cabinet simply shouting “*Cào!*”

By the time he finally gathered his wits well enough to call Blaise Norman, he was sputtering in both vocabularies.

“Calm down, Wan,” Blaise said. “You’re not making a bit of sense. What are you talking about, darlin?”

“That fucking *yáng guǐzi* has fucking stolen the fucking painting!”

“The who?”

“The foreign devil!”

“You mean the man who came to buy it? What was his name...Perón?”

“Who else? *Cào Cào Cào!* Fuck.”

“Are you sure?”

“No one else knew about it!”

"Is he still in town? You said he was staying at a hotel."

"He told me nothing. Can't find him. I'm sure he's gone. *Cào!*"

"All right. Let's see what we can do here, Wan. Take a deep breath. You're going to go into cardiac arrest over this."

"I can't breathe..."

"Just breathe, darlin. In out in out."

Wan did that but it only led to a coughing jag and a desperate grab for an e-cig. When that did not help, he ditched it and scrambled to get a Marlboro Red out of a pack he had hidden in his desk. In a frenzy, he broke the cigarette in half, then shoved both halves in his mouth and chewed them.

"Let me make a call and I'll get back to you," Blaise said. "Okay? Wan? Are you there, hon? Are you still alive?"

"*Cào,*" he said in a tiny voice, very quietly.

Like a candle going out.

In one smooth move, Blaise put the phone down on the base then picked it right back up again and called another number. When Mo Kline answered, Blaise herself took a deep breath and said as plainly as possible: "Honey, our little Renoir was stolen!"

"Yes, I know," Mo snapped. "Tell me about it."

"You know? How do you know that?"

"It just hit me."

"Don't tell me you and Dash have some role in this. You'll break my little old heart."

"*Your* heart? Why don't you tell me exactly who you stole it from?"

"Stole it *from*? My dear, I mean it was stolen *from* us."

"What?"

"Yes, from Wan's gallery. Last night."

"Someone stole the painting?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, my dear. You and Dash simply must help us get it back."

"How do you figure that?"

"Who else can we turn to?"

"The police."

"Now darlin, you realize that this painting may have a more checkered past than I do. The police might start what you might call a...big fat galloping investigation."

Mo heard some chatter at the other end of the line, mumbling, and fumbling with the receiver. Suddenly her father was on the phone and part of the negotiation.

"You have to help get it back, Mosa. Both of you."

"Oh, Dad," she said, dripping with scorn. "I'm 'shockedshocked' that you're involved."

"Don't make fun. You have to help."

"Why me? Why us?"

"Because we know and trust you and you know and trust Dash and you both know the Renoir."

"What does that even mean...know the Renoir? We've seen it, that's all."

"Yes, you've seen it. You're part of this."

"So we're what...art sleuths now? Just call the cops."

“Love to, sweetie. But that’s not exactly possible here, if you see what I mean.”

“Because it’s a stolen work of art.”

“Stolen is a tough word. I prefer borrowed without malice.”

“You stole the thing?”

“Of course not. I’m no thief. That’s a low occupation.”

“Blaise then.”

“Please! Don’t drag her into your sordid view of all this.”

“Wan?”

“No. It was sold to a cousin of his in China, then passed on to him.”

“China? What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s a long story, Mosa. I won’t say trust me because I know that annoys you. Let’s just say that it was borrowed a long time ago by some third party who eventually sold it to Wan’s cousin, who gave it to Wan. He and Blaise want to borrow against it to fund a charity to help people. Where’s the harm in that?”

“The stealing part, Dad. Stealing is the harm. See what I mean?”

“Not really, no.”

...

In May of 2014, Marco de Solis made a discovery while visiting the dentist that overcame even the pain in his molar. It also reignited his interest in the case of the stolen works. Against advice, he left the office with rubbery lips and cotton still in his mouth and headed directly for the library. There he logged on to one of the computers and did some research. He quickly found the old news that three of the original sixteen works stolen from the Santamarina wing had been returned to the National Museum eight years earlier. De Solis studied the photos of the event carefully. There was *Head of a Young Girl with a Blue Ribbon* by Renoir, *The Call* by Gauguin, and *The Road* by Cezanne back on the walls he had only seen empty three decades ago. The museum had even saved the original frames for two of them for all those years. A librarian walking by at that moment had to ask him to please stop tapping on the screen.

He had always been a simple man with simple thoughts. The facts added up to a theory and the theory was either wrong or right. Then justice came next. In a complex world, even he knew that this attitude was quaint. It gave him some comfort but it was also his weakness. He did not like untidy loose ends. Each thing had its place, himself included. An unsolved crime on his watch was an insult. His talent as a cop was that he needed to conclude, to wrap up, to resolve. Close the file. The heist was still an open wound he could not lick.

But now an article in a magazine in the dentist’s office and this information about the return of some of the works made him think that maybe – just maybe – the wound would heal. As the librarian walked away, he flicked the screen with a pudgy thumb in a teensy gesture of triumph.

Naturally he would not have known about the other man – that tall, gaunt figure – standing in his bare apartment miles away in Rosario and reading about the same old story, the ceremony for returning three of the stolen Impressionists.

As was his habit, and there being little heat in his run-down building, Navarro had collected old newspapers to use as insulation against the cold. He was stuffing some of

these into the spaces between the window and the wall when he noticed a headline, barely readable, in one of the papers. The print was faded and the paper yellowed but still he was able to get the gist of the article. Three of the works he had so carefully taken had been returned to the Museo Nacional because they were so valuable. Years of negotiations had led up to this.

What had he been thinking in allowing himself to be a pawn for the government? These precious works – the ones returned and thirteen more – had been in his possession. But he let them slip away just to help the junta and what had he gotten out of it? He had become a thief for the powers that be but was still living in misery. Then it hit him in a flash. A slow one but a bright one nonetheless. There was one more work out there, not on the list of missing art, not being pursued by anyone. That other Renoir! The Renoir he had personally stolen from Perón – the one he now came to think of as “his Renoir” – had not been returned. It was not part of the story in the media at the time.

Where was that now?

...

The fact that theft had not occurred to Mo sooner was annoying. Why not? After all, deception was as important in her upbringing as holiday dinners. It was practically a family trait. This was an annoying lapse in her scam radar and only proved to her that she had dropped her guard. No doubt it was because she was attracted to Dash and losing her sense of vigilance, which sometimes seemed to be her greatest skill. This was dangerous territory because it left her open to being betrayed. Again. Not by her father, which was par for the course, but by Dash. It was a risk she was unwilling to take. It was this above all that convinced her to drop out of the Renoir affair.

“You cannot quit, you have to figure this out,” Nabi advised.

She had listened to Mo’s explanation of the whole business but come to a very different conclusion.

“No I don’t.”

“You do. You cannot let these men have power over you. If you drop it now, you will never feel that you made your own decision about it. Just that you were running away.”

“What’s wrong with running? If there is something to run from.”

“Because we run from ourselves. And we always catch up.”

“Is that the Buddha?”

“No, it’s Dr. Phil. But it’s true.”

“Not for me, I’m done.”

“Here, you see?” Nabi said, turning her laptop in Mo’s direction and pointing to the screen. “The answer is out there. You have to find it.”

It was a page of websites for stolen art. Mo tried to ignore it, even after Nabi went to work, but she failed in the end. Nabi was right. Dash could lie, Blaise could falsify, her father could fabricate...but there was a mystery there more seductive to her than her own distrust. Solving it might resolve something. Empower her in some vague way. She glanced at the screen for a while, left and came back, scrolled through it casually, then started searching in earnest.

Stolen works of art, it turned out, were almost easier to track than unstolen ones. Every gallery or museum that had been the victim of art theft posted the works online themselves or on various international websites. It was very public information, a way to

inform the police and amateur detectives everywhere and to warn potential buyers. It therefore did not take much time at all to find information about a theft from the Santamarina wing of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires in 1980, during the time of the military junta. Mo combed through all that information, including the subsequent return with great fanfare of three of the pieces to the museum. The other thirteen stolen works were still missing, possibly in China. But the girl with the red bow was not among the ones mentioned. In fact there was no record of it anywhere. It was apparently not only an unknown work by the artist but also an unreported stolen work. That made it even more interesting...and valuable. Things were adding up in her mind.

“This is starting to sound like it has something to do with the Buenos Aires heist,” she told Dash at lunch the next day at Pret A Manger on 14th Street.

It was a bistro with sandwiches and wraps and informal seating that struck Mo as casual, to better reflect the professional distance she was now determined to keep from Dash. Unfortunately, he did not see it that way and took the informal setting to be more intimate.

“The wherewhatwho?”

“Argentina 1980. A bunch of drawings and small works were stolen from the National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires. Impressionists from one of the collections...”

Mo went on to describe the heist in as much detail as she could remember, including the return of three of the major pieces in 2005.

“And this Renoir was one of them?”

“No, but I think it may have been stolen at the same time.”

“Why?”

“It fits. Impressionist. No provenance. No frame. The China connection. And it was taken quickly.”

“How do you know that?”

“The drop of red in the corner. Not Renoir’s red. I think it’s dried blood. Maybe the thief acted quickly and cut himself when he smashed the frame.”

“Okay. So then why didn’t the museum ever list it as missing?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t part of the Santamarina collection and that’s all they cared about. Or maybe something shady in its acquisition and the museum didn’t want to bring attention to it.”

“Wow,” Dash said, nudging her with his elbow, from which she recoiled. “We’re talking international art heist now. How cool is that? What do we do about it?”

“They told you it was stolen from Wan’s gallery, right? Well my father and Blaise and Wan want us to get it back.”

“Nice. This is exciting, isn’t it? Isn’t it exciting?”

“It’s insane is what it is.”

“Why? We’ll be heroes.”

“Heroes are fools who don’t know it yet,” she said.

“That sounds like Mark – I mean Manny – talking,” Dash scolded.

Mo frowned at this. It was intrusive to use her father’s real name. What right did he have to stick his nose into her family life? What right did he have to get closer to the father she wanted to push away? But worst of all, what right did he have to be right?

“What do you expect?” she said. “His heroes were Charles Ponzi and Louie Lepke.”

“Ponzi I know. Who was Louie Lepke?”

“The man who invented contract killing for the mob. My father thought he was an innovative genius.”

“What a character.”

“He was a murderer. He killed people for a living.”

“I mean your father.”

...

Navarro went to his closet and took out a large cardboard box containing the detritus of his life. A filing system for someone with no reason to respect the past. He dumped the contents on the floor and began searching through it for a name...the name of the man who bought his Renoir. And only for a few thousands pesos! Floor plans of local museums, shopping lists, old newspapers, and other scraps filled the floor. But it was no use; he had managed to save only the most worthless trash.

Navarro, even at his best as a young undercover agent in Buenos Aires, had no talent for precision. This is the reason he had been chosen to lead the team into the museum that night. His commander detested him, and the man they called Mr. White saw him as a crude tool he could use. If he got caught, they calculated, no one would feel badly for him. And he seemed dumb enough to do what he was told without questions, and therefore just dumb enough to pull it off.

They were, of course, right.

But in spite of all that, as he sat on the floor doing his version of thinking, there was something in another part of his dim brain that seemed to glow with meaning. It was a name. One name. He had not heard it or even thought of it in many years. But now, sitting in a pile of faded papers, brooding over his choices, the name came shining through.

Fernando Perón.

“*Qué putas pasa!*” Navarro shouted.

And in that instant, Navarro convinced himself that his old ally and nemesis must have the painting. The reason? Perhaps nothing more than that it was the only idea he could come up with. The only connection. No matter. This frail notion quickly became a conviction and soon a fixation. He stood up like a man with a mission. Here was a chance to change his fate and he became determined to undo his mistake. Not his life of petty crime but the mistake of working for someone else, of not getting his due. He crumbled the newspaper article and ate it as an act of commitment. He would do whatever it took to get his Renoir back and become the man he was supposed to be. The master thief. At least in his own deluded version of himself.

Navarro, who did not actually know how to laugh, cleared his throat in a way that might have been mistaken for a guffaw. His old partner Fernando, who had taken the work from the museum on an impulse and hidden it in his apartment, must have tracked it down. What a pathetic *tipo!* Perón was in love with a little girl who could not even find his *bulto* to give him pleasure. Navarro imagined Perón now an older, foolish man, hopelessly obsessed with this painting, maybe even stealing it back, and drooling over it in the dark. After thirty-four years!

What a fool!

Somehow the fact that Navarro himself was about to obsessively track down both Perón and the painting did not occur to him in any way as ironic. Or foolish for that matter. Or even especially drooly.

SEVEN

“All colours will agree in the dark.”

Francis Bacon

On the way to Dash’s gallery in Brooklyn, Mo knew for certain that she was being followed by Botero. He was barely hiding himself anymore and even seemed to nod at her from the across the street as she got into a taxi. Was he staking out Nabi’s apartment? It seemed that way. Mo assumed that he was waiting for her to retrieve the painting before making his move, whatever that was going to be. But when she entered the gallery this time, a new surprise pushed those thoughts out. Her father was standing there with Dash.

“Figures,” she said, dismissing his attempt at a hug. “Only some kind of scam could bring you out of hiding.”

“I wasn’t in hiding. I was in Bayshore.”

“We found a guy,” Dash said to her.

“We?” Mo said, knowing this did not include her. “You mean the two of you.”

“Yeah. We found this guy...”

It was a phrase she heard a thousand times before. Found a guy to fence the goods, found a guy to serve as a courier, found a guy to lean on the other guy...it was a code meaning that her father had lined up another hood.

“All you people know each other?” she said to Manny, meaning all liars and cheats.

“No, he’s not Jewish,” Manny said, missing her point completely. “He’s from Argentina. He was a cop in the old days under the junta. His name is Marco de Solis. He was the officer in charge of the local precinct on the night of the Santamarina heist back in 1980.”

“So you know about that?”

“Yes, Dash told me your theory,” he said. “I think you might be right and this guy knows all about it and might know about our Renoir.”

“*Our* Renoir,” she said with bite. “And you found him...how?”

“You know...a...well...sort of a...”

“Prison buddy,” Mo said.

“Basically. Yes.”

“Let me guess. You met a guy in prison who happens to know a guy who knows a guy from Argentina who was once arrested by a cop who happened to have been involved with an art heist in 1980.”

“That’s good, Mo. Very astute.”

“And you want us to go and find out what he knows so we can get back a stolen painting that was stolen from you.”

“That’s an excellent *tachlis*, Mosa.”

“And this sounds rational to you?” she asked, turning to Dash who was smiling thinly.

“It’s an adventure,” he shrugged.

“Look,” her father said by way of sweetening the offer. “He probably won’t tell you anything anyway. I mean, he’s retired now and very...”

“Cautious,” Dash jumped in. “He won’t discuss it over the phone.”

“Of course not, so we have to...what? Write letters in prison code?”

“Talk in person.”

“Great. Let’s add a paranoid Argentinean cop to our little crew. Why not?”

“Ex. He’s retired.”

“Where does he live?”

Dash looked at her for a moment, then at her father, then back to her. Knowing the answer would not go down well, he was trying to find a clever way of telling her. There was none. He gave up.

“Buenos Aires.”

“I see,” Mo said with no tone in her voice. “So now you want us to fly down to Buenos Aires to interview this guy.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve never even been to Gettysburg, let alone Argentina.”

“You want to get to the bottom of this, don’t you?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you speak any Spanish?” Manny asked.

“*Un poquito*,” Mo said. “Mrs. Esquella in high school, but I couldn’t stand her.”

“It’s all right. De Solis speaks English.”

“You two should be in vaudeville together,” Mo said. “Or on a chain gang. I can’t just pick up and go down to Argentina.”

“Why not? You don’t have to report to work, after all.”

“Yes but I would like to have that option some day.”

“What do you think is going to happen to us down there?”

“Let’s see...we would be probing into a time when a military junta ruled the country. It was the Era of the Disappeared. The Dirty War. People taken off the streets by the police. You want me to start counting all the people we could possibly piss off.”

“But that was all so long ago. And he might have the answer to this little mystery,” Dash insisted. “Maybe someone from the original heist also stole the painting from Wan.”

“I saw that guy again on the way out here. We’re not the only ones looking for this thing.”

“Have you been contacted by Carmen Lake?” Manny asked.

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

“And why should this cop...”

“Ex...”

“...even talk to us?”

“I was thinking about that,” Dash said. “We can say we’re journalists working on the story of the heist. You do the interview, I’ll shoot pictures of him.”

“I thought you said he was paranoid.”

“You said that. I said guarded.”

“I think you said cautious,” Manny corrected.

“What’s the difference?” Mo jumped in. “He’s paranoid from a paranoid time. He won’t talk to us.”

“Even paranoids like publicity.”

“Yes, well, it doesn’t matter at all because I am not going because I do not fly.”

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t fly,” her father repeated. “Haven’t you grown out of that, sweetie?”

“No.”

“But you came down to Florida to see me.”

“Fueled by disgust.”

“Maybe there’s a train,” Manny said brightly.

But this was too much for Dash.

“Sure,” he said, “there’s a mule train. It leaves when the winter snow melts and arrives at the next Ice Age.”

Mo shivered in lieu of laughing. Dash could joke around all he wanted to but on this matter Mo was adamant. Flying down to Argentina was not an option. It was simply never ever going to happen.

...

Fernando Perón was not a rich man but he had done well for himself.

The restaurant was quite popular and he was a charming and doting maitre’d. He even appeared on the cover of several local magazines touting the success of South American businesses in the area. As his reputation grew, he was shedding that sense of impetuous desire that had characterized his youth. He could focus more on his work and was dating only the most appealing of the women that came across his path and did not necessarily go to bed with all of them. He had taken some cooking classes and suggested dishes to the chef that became popular. He studied interior design and tried to make the restaurant more engaging. In spite of himself, perhaps, he began to mature.

For these reasons, he quickly realized that keeping his secret love a secret was a mistake. Hiding her in his bedroom was not a way to show his respect. That is how it came about a few days later that any patron seated at Table #12 for two on the left side of the main room at *El Secreto* might have noticed the small painting hanging on the wall above the table. It was affixed with a light that cast a warm glow over the canvas. The occasional astute diner might have realized that this was an actual oil painting, not a print. And the careful observer might even have recognized the style and subject, an Impressionist work showing a young girl with a red bow, as popular in Europe during the late 19th century. Only the most focused viewer would have seen the signature in cobalt blue at the lower left and connected it to the real Renoir. If there were any such visitors, they never mentioned it.

But Perón never passed a day at the restaurant without nodding in her direction, as though from her perch on the wall and with her oily eyes, she could see him and was in some way returning his gaze. In any case, he began to think of her as a kind of *ángel de la guarda*, watching over him and over the business and even, by the power of her innocence, bringing customers in and making them feel welcome and open to a delicious new experience.

...

“What is this?” Mo asked, holding the piece of paper up like mold.

“It is a list of tango clubs in Buenos Aires,” Nabi said. “Very romantic.”

“First of all, this is a business trip not a tryst. And secondly, there is no way in hell that I am going.”

“Yes yes. Of course. But while you are there, you might as well take advantage. It is the tango capital of the world, after all.”

“I don’t even know how to tango,” Mo whined.

“What? How on earth do ever expect to meet a husband?”

“I’ve met plenty of husbands, just not mine.”

“I don’t understand you American women. You work at your careers but you are unwilling to work at getting a husband.”

“It will happen if it happens.”

“That is what I mean. This attitude of entitlement. You expect a decent man to drop in your lap from above. It takes work. You must learn to seduce, to be a friend, to please sexually, to discuss sports, to cook...and above all to dance.”

“I know...some of that stuff.”

“For an attractive woman, you have the worst dating skills I have ever seen.”

“No I don’t. What’s wrong with disharmony.com? Works for me.”

But Nabi, in no mood for sarcasm, ignored the joke and rummaged through her CDs. She finally found what she was looking for, mounted it, and turned up the volume on the stereo. A pulsing rhythm filled the room. Taking Mo in hand, she rather sternly straightened her up, placed her hands in the right positions and held her in a dance embrace. She began to lightly sway with the music. She glared when Mo resisted and ignored her when she tried to pull away.

“I don’t trust men who tango,” Mo said.

“You don’t trust men,” Nabi corrected.

“They’re after something.”

“Which we give them to get what we want. But only from the right ones. Now stop fidgeting and follow me. Don’t step, glide. Glide, glide.”

For the next hour she forced Mo to move fluidly, to slide her toe along the floor, shift her weight. Step back but lean forward. Slow, slow, quick quick, slow. Follow her lead back and forward, around in a circle to the left, stand still for a beat, move again. Mo was graceful but reluctant to show it. Dancing at a club was how she met Russ. A bad omen. Yet after a while, exhausted from the effort to resist, she began to go with the flow, even enjoy it. Her defenses softened. She started to forget about all the men who had danced her around in circles like Russ and her father. And maybe Dash. And Botero out there somewhere, stalking her, even if only in her imagination.

Putting all of them out of her mind, gliding through the irresistible rhythm of the music, the trip to South America began to seem plausible. Possible even. Or maybe even exotic.

Botero at that moment was sitting on a bench in the park across from Nabi’s apartment, deciding to call it a night and go back home. He was no figment in anyone’s mind; he was a very real person.

His name was Sal Fatello and he was just what he appeared to be. Not a painter's model, but an ex-con always looking for freelance work. The slicked back hair, the burly form, the fat shoes, and the lack of any neck were just coincidental to the Botero figures. In prison they called him The Thud, which was more accurate. With a fist like a potato, he could knock someone out with a single punch. A worthwhile skill to market.

In prison or out, he usually worked for a higher fee but as a favor, he was following Mo at a discount. It did not matter to him if she knew it or not. It did not matter if she tried to avoid him or not. He said he would follow her until she made her move and that is exactly what he was going to do.

Even if it meant mashing potatoes along the way.

...

There is reason and then there is desire.

One is based on the cool race of electrons through the cortex of the brain. The other is slower...blood and sweat and other fluids coursing. The first you know when you know it; the second you feel when you feel it and once you do, there is nothing else to know.

Mo knew all about distrust in the same way one would know subtraction. The logic of it, the calculus. But this was increasingly useless when it came to Dash because in spite of her doubts, she still felt her sauces steeping. It was like trying to ignore a nosebleed by applying a swab of logic. Quite useless.

Somewhere over the Cayman Islands, Mo finally looked out the window. She had spent most of the flight pretending to be asleep on the subway. In other words, as far underground and near to the still core of the earth as possible. But the sun was setting and an intense light was illuminating the edge of the cover over the window at her seat. Worth a peek, she took a deep breath and lifted the shade.

At that moment the sky was going from navy to Persian blue at the horizon and the land was a deep purple rising up to meet it. A Rothko perhaps, she thought, from the later period, sensation like a scalp massage. At the rim, gold from that Turner painting of Flint Castle mixed with gaudy yellow from a 1950s postcard of a jukebox shimmered in a haze. She stared at this for a long time without fretting. It was beautiful of course but more importantly, it was real life. And because it was not an image, it was not something she would have to catalog and recall. In other words, she could relax into this moment of pure sense. See what she saw without strain.

Then she understood that there could be something liberating about being on that plane as it flew away from her bed, her city, her home. Botero tracking her moves was back there somewhere out of reach. Her father always planning the next scam was down there and out of touch. She discovered what most flyers do, that it is possible to get a new perspective from high up and see one's mistakes as smaller than before.

Russ for instance.

He cheated on her and that was bad enough. But worse than that, he had an affair with her boss. Affair? That was the word he used because it sounded sophisticated. He screwed her is what he did, behind Mo's back. When her boss threatened to tell Mo, he tried to buy her silence with a necklace he bought with money he had stolen from Mo's bank account. The worst part was that her boss hated the necklace anyway; she ended up planning to fire Mo because of the whole thing. That was when the idea of a visual

sabbatical came up. Mo dumped Russ and the job in the same day and felt liberated for a few minutes, then abused for much longer.

But Russ was down there now, an insignificant speck on the ground living his speck life. Mo ordered a drink, a rum and coke because nothing fancier occurred to her, and watched the colors shift into deeper shades as night expanded. Dutch, she thought, like some landscape by Ruisdael. Foreboding maybe but it was hard to tell yet.

Dash had a seat on the other side of the plane, the only one they could get on short notice. This was a good thing, given her current line of thought. Because without even knowing why, when Mo slid the shade down again it was with the force you would use to slam a window on someone's finger. Or a guillotine on a deserving neck.

...

It is unfair to judge a city during the taxi sprint from the airport to the hotel.

But Mo, with little experience outside of New York, did just that.

As she looked out the window during the ride from the Ministro Pistarini Airport, the landscape went from horizontal to vertical, the density of buildings grew, and the barrios flew by. Her impression was that Buenos Aires, like any great city on the planet, was a jarring mix of rich and poor, old and new, speed and stagnation. Wide boulevards shared the space with nestled streets, classic pink facades of public buildings elbowed chartreuse stores and yellow doors. The city was alive with color, old world shades mixed with bold new tints, and none of it impinging because it was real and ever-changing.

They passed by a baroque music hall and above it she could see skyscrapers in the distance. Gaudy signs across from the elegant windows of international designers. A limo over here, a cardboard shelter over there. The streets were crowded with fashionistas and at night it all seemed to glitter and gleam in the center, a dream of a city, in dazzles and haze. Thick as a concrete rain forest, dense as architectural glass. As they arrived at the Claridge Hotel in the downtown section, Mo thought she had stepped into a movie about her own life, only more vivid. Or maybe just hotter.

After settling into separate rooms again, they met up in the lobby where a curtain reminded Mo of the red in *The Lady and the Unicorn Tapestry*, like feet on a radiator in the dead of winter. With a light cool breeze coming in through a nearby window. Nice feeling, particularly because the curtain was real, not a picture of one, which meant that she was living in the moment. Life over image; that was a good thing.

"This cop, Marco de Solis, is not available until tomorrow morning," Dash said. "Are you tired?"

"Not really."

"Then I was thinking...do you tango?"

"I took a lesson," she said. "But you, of course, tango. Right?"

She twiddled her fingers quickly when she said this, to imply that he was fast with the ladies. To reply, Dash slid his fingers along his palm smoothly making little dance steps. Style not speed.

"Right. Let's go for it," he said but was surprised when Mo produced the list that Nabi had given her.

They took another taxi to a dance hall called *Nuevo Salón*, one of hundreds of malonga clubs throughout the city. Along the way Mo was aware of a throb or a thump she mistook to be the frosty blue of a headache. But it was not. It was the beat of the city.

She was very familiar with the yellow neon pulse of jazzy New York, but this was not that. It was the insistent, hesitant rhythm of tango. Images of the dance and dancers themselves were everywhere, even spilling out the doors and onto the streets and on a mild night like that the streets were thrumming with it.

Dash was always taking pictures. Like most photographers, he traveled with a variety of cameras the way other people took enough underwear. But most of the time he used his iPhone to take quick snaps of whatever caught his eye. He was thinking of a book of these, he said. In the taxi as it flew through the streets – some refined, some coarse, narrow or broad – he took constant shots through the window of the car. A blur of images that Mo at first found peculiar. But as she watched him she realized that this was no different from what she did automatically. It was a way of fixing what you saw in the eye's mind, holding onto the moments as they flashed by into oblivion. Just a way of knowing you were alive. And remembering that later on.

The dance hall was garish in some respects and restrained in others. Glowing sconces mixed with stage lights; class meets pizzazz. The room was packed with people sitting at bistro tables and watching the couples moving across the speckled floor. Women in slinky dresses and spiky strapped heels and men in fedoras and suspenders moved like lovers through their dramatic paces to the suspended but rhythmic sounds of Narcotango. This was not swiny swing or jivey jive. Tango was all desire and longing, smooth as pomade and delicate as a long silk slit.

Dash gestured for them to go to the floor and Mo closed her eyes, trying to recall the moves she had practiced as colors, thick like Ultra Auburn, the hair tint, and molten like Deep Flame, the shoe dye. Embracing for the dance, this was the first time they were within body heat distance of each other, a test of their thermodynamics. It seemed like a good mix. Touching his hand was exciting and the muscles on his back felt ripply and sensual. His frame was good, meaning that he held her firmly but not rigidly. His right hand was on her shoulder blade where it should be, not on her lower back. The distance between their chests was constant, the better to guide her forward or back or to the side. Mo stood dancer-straight but softened her shoulders and tried to lean in towards him without losing her balance. She tried to stay on her toes. This was what Nabi had shown her to do.

Tango, as everyone knows, begins with smooth walking and this they practiced first until they felt comfortable with each other's pace and stride. The dancing there was intimate tango, romantic tango, not the dramatic show in the movies. Tango as a way of whispering to each other. Foreplay maybe or at least twoplay. She could feel his breathing and without a thought, it was in sync with hers.

Toe first, slide the along the floor, glide, look in his eyes, pay attention to his next direction. Lean and follow, glide. Mo began by rehearsing all these basics but after a few minutes, she relaxed and just went with the motions. He was a good partner, never giggling or staring at his feet. When they stumbled, he smiled and continued. When his indication was off and she missed the move, he tried again. Patient.

Slight turn for her to complete an ocho, a step and kick. Stride, stride, stride together. A snapping turn, a circle with the foot, an inner kick, stride and stride. The music was like a heartthrob and the red of the cushions on the chairs was Susan Hayward red, not her hair but the lips...like walking on powdery sand.

Then, a silence in the room. The music stopped, the dancers stopped. On a small stage Mo had not noticed before, sat a man on a wooden chair. He was holding a kind of accordion known locally as a *bandoneon*. He was an older man, wearing glasses and an ill-fitting cap. She could see the skin above his socks as he settled in. As he began to play, his gnarled fingers slithered along the buttons as though they were still young.

It was a melancholy song that he played, not a dance tune and therefore no one danced. Instead, the couples were leaning against each other, swaying to the music, holding hands or wrapping arms. It was as though the frenzy to live life had ceased, the urgency faded, and all that was left hanging in the air was the soft sound of time slipping.

She did not want to, did not need to, had no intention of, refused to believe in...but standing there with her arm around Dash's waist, swaying slowly to this song, she felt her heart opening. Color of a sunrose blooming. It was not a good idea but then, it was not an idea at all. It was a feeling. She would resist this as long as possible; it would not work.

Midnight, wide awake, walking back to the hotel with the local *porteños* tangoing or eating or strolling all around them, Mo was surprised that she was sweating not just under the arms but beneath her breasts and behind her ears. Sweating, in other words, not just from exertion but from passion building. If you can tango together, you can live together. Nabi said that. But did that mean you could trust the one you dance with?

Only time would tell.

...

The next day, they visited de Solis in a small apartment in the Almagro barrio. Señora de Solis was a compact and pleasant lady who welcomed them as though to a palace. In fact, it was a modest home but very neat and orderly. Mementos from de Solis' days as a cop were now proudly mounted on the walls at her insistence: his badge was in a frame as were photos of him with the governor, with a movie star, with the man whose lost son he found in the woods.

De Solis himself was a chubby man with little hair, but kindly and relaxed in his manner, which calmed them. He ushered them into the tiny living room and offered them seats as he landed in an easy chair worn like a catcher's mitt. Carmina served them tea from a chipped teapot the color of red Legos. It reminded Mo of an old plush theater seat from her youth, cushy but lumpy. Nice at first, then quickly annoying.

After they explained the reason for their visit, de Solis looked pleased and nodded his head. This was good considering that they were lying through their teeth to him.

"You are asking about this...for why?" de Solis said.

"An article," Dash said.

"A book," Mo said, in perfect conflict.

"An article that will become a book," Dash corrected, as he set up his Nikon on a tripod.

De Solis saw a tiny version of himself reflected in the lens and felt quite happy about it. He imagined that little head on a large screen, finally recognized for the top cop that he had once been.

"You make a movie?" he asked. "Docu..."

"Documentary!" Dash said. "Of course, that too."

"Very nice," de Solis said, grinning.

Thus inspired, de Solis went through the whole story of the night of the heist and all the details and presumptions he had put together about the crime. The missing seventeenth piece, for example.

“I am not Mr. Holmes,” he said, “but I know to count.”

“Yet you stopped the investigation?”

“Yes. Indeed yes.”

“But why?”

“The witness. This woman who saw. Instantly, of course, we stopped.”

“Why? You said she saw a car pull away.”

De Solis looked at them oddly, then realized that, as outsiders, as Americans, as youngsters, they would not know what that meant.

“*Un auto verde*,” he said plainly.

“A green beard?” Dash repeated.

“A green *car*,” Mo corrected.

“Yes, precisely so.”

“So it was what...a really bad shade of green?”

“*El auto de los desaparecidos*. The Automobile of the Disappeared. A green Ford Falcon.”

They were stumped.

“You must see...it was the time of *la última dictadura*. The last military junta to rule in Argentina. The time of the kidnappings. Thousands taken from their homes and never seen again. The secret service were...how do you say...”

“Scaring the shit out of everyone,” Dash offered.

“Precisely so. The shit. These were the cars used by the *Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado*. The green Falcon meant kidnapping, torture, disappearance.”

“This is the secret service that worked for the junta.”

“Yes, precisely so.”

“So then the Argentine government arranged to have these works stolen from the country’s own museum. Why?”

“For the Chinese. To the Taiwan.”

“Yes, I read about that,” Mo said. “The junta sold these works to the Taiwanese government.”

“No, I do not believe so. It was not to make for a sale. It was to make for a trade.”

“A trade for what?”

“Arms.”

“As in guns?”

“As you say. Guns,” de Solis said, holding an air gun in his hand and shooting it at the ceiling.

“I’m a little lost here,” Dash said. “The secret service stole artworks from a national museum in order to trade them with the Taiwanese government for arms. Is that what you’re saying?”

“That is precisely, yes.”

“Why?”

“The embargo. In this time, you see, the United States made the arms embargo. To punish the junta. The junta could not get...guns...to fight. But Taiwan was not with the embargo and was willing to send arms.”

“The junta had no money so they paid for the arms with stolen art,” Mo summed up.

“Yes. For trade. For arms. For guns. For the war.”

“What war?”

“The war for the prize, of course.”

Mo thought all along that the prize was the Renoir painting. It had taken her a while to realize that it was not, at least not back in 1980. The prize, she then concluded, must have been the money the painting would sell for. Now it struck her that the money was not it either. Nor was it what the money could buy, the arms. The prize was something else entirely. But what?

De Solis, former inspector and police captain, was no slouch at reading faces and he saw in Mo and in Dash the vacant look of those with no clue.

“*Islas Malvinas*,” he said.

But getting no reaction at all, he tried again with a less formal name.

“*Los Falklos*,” he said plainly.

Dash was mute. Mo, for her part, had a few phrases in Spanish rattling around in her head but they were mostly the titles of paintings. *Las Meninas*, for example, or *La Trinidad*, neither of which were of any use here. *Los Falklos* did not ring a bell at all. Like a game of charades that reached a dead end, the three of them stared back and forth for quite a while before de Solis tried one more time to make his point.

“The war for the islands,” he said.

“Which islands?”

“*Los Falkos*.”

“The Falkland Islands?” Mo said, taking a stab.

“Yes. The junta needed arms to fight the war for the Falkland Islands. Precisely so.”

...

De Solis, anxious to make a good impression in his starring role, needed to take a break from the filming. He would go to the store to buy cigarillos, stretch his legs, and return in a half hour to continue. Dash made a big gesture of turning off the video on the camera, even though he never started it in the first place. While he was out, Mo tried to get online but the connection was not working, so instead she called Nabi for help.

“Are you near a computer?” Mo asked.

“Are you still in Argentina?”

“Yes. Can you look something up for me? The Falklands War.”

“War? What have you gotten yourself involved in?”

“Whatever it is, *you* convinced me to get into it. Remember? This is your punishment. Can you look it up?”

Nabi found the information and read the key points aloud to Mo, who repeated them to Dash now sitting sideways in de Solis’ overstuffed chair, feet dangling.

“The Falklands War, also called the Conflict or Crisis, was fought between Argentina and the United Kingdom in 1982,” Mo repeated. “It was called the *Guerra de las Malvinas* here. It lasted for ten weeks.”

“Ten weeks?” Dash asked.

“Is that a lot or a little?”

“No idea. Keep going,” Dash said.

“In April of that year, the junta invaded and occupied the Falkland Islands, about 300 miles off the coast of Argentina. They were trying to finally establish a claim over the area that Argentina had maintained for two hundred years. Unfortunately Great Britain claimed them too and the Brits saw it as an invasion of their territory.”

“This was in the 20th century?”

“The Brits!” Nabi shouted. “Do *not* get me started on the Brits! Do you know anything about the Anglo-Mysore Wars?”

“No,” Mo insisted. “One war at a time. Let’s stick with the Falklands for now.”

“The Brits sent a naval task force to stop the Argentine Navy and Air Force, then made an amphibious assault on the islands,” Nabi continued. “Argentina surrendered 74 days later, returning the islands to British control.”

Mo repeated this out loud.

“It’s like a joke war,” Dash said.

“No joke,” Mo said, listening and echoing. “Almost a thousand soldiers died. There was a lot of support for it here. Patriotic sentiment ran high in Argentina even under military rule. But the defeat prompted protests against the junta and that contributed to its downfall. In the UK, the success helped re-elect the Conservative Party.”

“A tiny war with global ripples,” Dash summed.

“*Sí*,” Mo said, going local. “Precisely so. Thanks Nabi.”

“You think this is bad...what about the Raj in India? Would you like me to read that aloud too?”

“Later,” Mo said. “

“Listen to this,” Nabi continued. “Under British rule...”

“Nabi? Hello? The connection is going. Breaking up. Hello hello?”

When de Solis returned, Dash took a few still shots of him, then set the camera up again as though he were recording. Once de Solis was settled in his seat, smoking a thin cigar and looking quite serious, Mo asked him the question she had in mind after her phone call.

“Why on earth did the junta want to go to war with England over the Falkland Islands?” Mo asked. “They are just some islands, right?”

“*Some* islands?” de Solis repeated, puzzled by the word.

“Little islands. Not important islands. Why fight for them?”

“No. Not for the islands.”

“Then for what?”

“For the oils of course,” de Solis said.

“Oils?”

“*Sí*.”

“You mean oil paint?” Mo asked, her thinking tainted by stolen art.

“*Que?* No, no no. The oils. *Petroleo*,” de Solis said.

He rummaged through a stack of magazines and pulled out one called *International Business*, in an English language version. Not typical reading for a retired cop but the address label to de Solis’s dentist explained that. Mo looked through it and got the gist of the cover article. She read part of it aloud to both of them:

The Falkland Islands are in the news again with renewed efforts to manage and control its potentially vast oil reserves. The promise of offshore oil riches has hovered over the Falkland Islands for years with seismic data going all the way back to the 1950s and exploratory wells drilled in 1998. More recent findings suggest that the field, known as Sea Lion, may contain up to 400 million barrels of oil. This might lead to a multi-billion dollar industry that could make the Falklands one of the richest communities on earth.

The possibility also brings back the long-held antagonism between Britain and Argentina, which have both claimed sovereignty over the islands and even fought a brief war...

“So you’re saying they knew about this back in 1980?” Dash asked.

De Solis said something in Spanish that Mo and Dash did not get. It was a street phrase they used in the barrio to mean “obviously” and roughly translated as: do fat men fart? The point being that although he could not prove this, it seemed pretty obvious to him.

“Yes,” he said emphatically. “It was for this oils, the war. Of course, precisely so. Why else war for these...*some*...islands? But when the junta...*perdió*?”

“Lost the war?”

“*Sí*. Lost the war. This oils was held quiet until they could go again after it. Now, as you see, the secret is for all,” he said, tapping the magazine.

“So the stolen art from the National Museum was traded to the government of Taiwan for weapons they could not get any other way because of the arms embargo. And they needed them to take over the Falkland Islands to get at the oil? Precisely so?” Mo asked.

“*Sí*. This my theory.”

“Yet the art seems to have ended up in private hands,” Dash said.

De Solis wrinkled his brow at this, not understanding the expression. Dash rephrased it.

“It was given to the Taiwanese government but ended up in the hands of private owners.”

Dash mimed this by first moving his hands as though shoving air away and then bringing it back to his chest. A hammy way to demonstrate “given and returned” but it seemed to work.

“Ah, *Sí. Privado*,” de Solis said. “Precisely so.”

“How did that happen?”

“I no know this. *Corrupción*?”

“That explains plenty,” Mo said. “Do you remember the name of anyone in the Taiwanese government who was involved with this?”

De Solis shrugged and laughed as though the question was absurd.

“Oh, no, no. I no know. No.”

“What about anyone here, in Argentina?” Mo asked. “Anyone involved with the theft back in 1980?”

The question seemed equally ridiculous, yet this was the moment when whispers of the original heist came echoing back through the canyons of de Solis’ sense of self-preservation. He had heard certain things, names and theories about the who and the what

of the theft. He had uncovered certain facts on his own, quietly and privately. He knew what he knew. But he had learned to ignore all that, then and now, and to keep his mouth shut. *En boca cerrada no entran moscas*; in closed mouths, flies do not enter.

Still, if there was a chance to finally conclude *his* investigation...

“No, no, no. *Perdone*,” he concluded.

But his words lacked conviction, even to his own ears.

...

De Solis, despite his demeanor as an uncomplicated man, had a good instinct for people. He was not fooled by the notes or the camera. Not really. The expressions of interest and concern on the faces of his two guests went far beyond those of any dispassionate reporters. He guessed that Dash and Mo were asking about all this for something more than a documentary. They might be tracking down the other missing works of art; the thirteen not returned and that extra one never reported. If they were successful, they might mention him in their story as an ally. In this way, to his own mind, he could finally become the hero he had failed to be all those years ago.

They were packing up to leave, de Solis still sitting in the chair, when he suddenly spoke:

“Well yes, there was one man,” he said. “Yes. He was a – what you say – *una sombra*?”

“A shadow?” Mo asked.

“*Un rumor*,” de Solis said, trying again.

“A rumor?”

“Yes, precisely. He was a rumor, this man. One of the SIDE, the secret service.”

“Someone who knew about the heist?”

De Solis said nothing.

“A man who was part of the heist?”

De Solis said nothing.

“What was his name?”

“Navarro,” de Solis said. “But this is rumor only.”

“Do you know anything else about him? Where he is. If he is still alive.”

De Solis shook his head and could offer nothing further. He had said enough.

“This was tragedy for my country. This junta and their dogs.”

“But you worked for them,” Mo said. “You were a chief inspector in Buenos Aires then.”

Dash blanched when she said that, thinking she had gone too far.

“I worked under them,” de Solis corrected, “because this was the only way to protect the innocent.”

“How did you do that?”

“By arresting them. Precisely so.”

“You arrested the innocent?”

“As many as I could. Within reason, to avoid suspicion.”

De Solis could see that his explanation was not getting through and he added, sadly: “You cannot understand these things.”

“I’m old enough,” Mo replied, thinking he meant that she was too young to understand the past.

“You are American,” de Solis said. “Everything is given there. Everything is promised. You cannot know what it is to live in fear of betrayal.”

“Believe me, I know all about betrayal,” Mo protested.

But the former top cop, so used to weighing answers, knew she meant a much lighter version of these matters.

“You know of broken promises,” he suggested, “of lies told to the heart. Yes, precisely so. But of a life betrayed by one’s country. No, I no think.”

“So you arrested innocent people to fight against it?”

“I did what I must,” he said. “To keep the law, but protect the people from it. You see?”

“No.”

“Yes,” de Solis replied, meaning that he knew she could not understand and knowing this, he did not try to explain further.

But as Mo and Dash opened the downstairs door to the street to leave, de Solis suddenly popped his head over the banister and added:

“Ah yes. *Otro rumor.*”

They stopped in their tracks and stared back up at him.

“Rosario,” he said.

“His name is Rosario? Navarro Rosario?”

“No, no. Castoro Navarro. He is in Rosario.”

“Where is that?”

De Solis waved his finger in the air and disappeared over the handrail.

“I take you,” he shouted back.

EIGHT

“There is certainly a red for everyone.”
Christian Dior

One morning as Perón entered the restaurant, he went through his usual routine of checking the tables, adding receipts, setting up. When he walked to the bathroom to check on the toilet paper, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Something different in the main room but so subtle in the dim light that he ignored it at first. On the second pass however, he stopped and looked at the wall over Table #12.

The painting was gone!

In a panic, Perón raced around the room trying to convince himself that he had moved it. When that did not work, he tore through his registry to see if any recent patrons stood out as thieves. Only as a last resort did he begin to search for it in unexpected places at *El Secreto*. Under tables, in the coat room, the bathrooms. He eventually found it leaning against a steel cabinet on the floor of the kitchen. The kitchen! Where any fool might have stepped on her! The handyman must have done this, he realized, while replacing one of the bulbs near the table.

Perón gathered up the young girl and sat down with her in his lap, gently touching her cheeks and apologizing. He would not let this happen again. He took a piece of white paper from a large roll used to cover tables and wrapped her carefully. An empty pizza box on one of the counters annoyed him because it meant the waiters were ordering in but now he took it and placed the painting inside. It fit perfectly. The fact that the words “Caution: Hot” were printed on the box did not escape his sense of irony. He immediately took her home and placed her on a top shelf in the hall closet. He breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Diners that night at the small table were treated to a terrible painting of Buenos Aires in the rain, a palette knife job that one of the waiters had picked up thinking it was art. It may have been to someone, but it was no Renoir. And as much as it offended Perón’s taste, it comforted him to know it was there in place of the real thing.

...

As Dash arranged to rent a car, de Solis contacted a friend in the department and easily found Navarro’s address. The two-hour ride from Buenos Aires to Rosario might have been a good opportunity to get more information but de Solis settled in the back seat and immediately fell asleep. His snoring was interrupted occasionally by troubled gulps of air; perhaps he was dreaming about the crime or finally bringing a felon to justice. Perhaps he merely had a fluttery uvula.

“So every color feels like something to you?” Dash asked. “That must be pretty overwhelming.”

“It was like that when I was younger,” Mo said. “They thought I was autistic but I was only overloaded with sensory input.”

“Who’s they?”

“The whitecoats. But I can control it better now. It mostly happens only when I focus on a particular color that I see in the world. That’s less jarring. But the color in images is different. When I see pictures, I can’t escape the effect.”

“Why is that?”

“They think that the brain has too much else to do in normal seeing. It has to process motion and dimension and change and other stuff. That interferes with the synesthesia. But images are flat and still. I feel all the colors and I can’t forget them.”

“The whitecoats think that?”

“Yup.”

“Tested a lot as a kid, were we?”

“You have no idea.”

“And the other way around? Do touches have colors?”

“Sometimes.”

“What about this?” he asked and very gently ran his fingertips along the skin of her forearm.

“Zuni red,” she said instantly because it brought to mind a twirled bracelet she had seen and read about online.

The Zunis soaked yarn in alungen and native lime, then washed it in yucca suds, then boiled it in mothlana. All that work just to get a single red that was redred to them.

It was to her too, his touch.

De Solis gobbled again.

Navarro had done better for himself since the days after the fall of the junta, but barely. He ran his little scams – a theft here, a break-in there – and managed to afford a one-bedroom apartment on the east side of town. Hoping to catch him off guard, they decided simply to show up there but when they did, the door was open and Navarro seemed unconcerned about them walking in. He was busy packing a battered suitcase.

Dash was about to launch into his explanation about the documentary, which worked so well so far, but he was shoved aside as de Solis moved forward and began talking to Navarro in Spanish. He introduced himself without identifying his former job but also assumed the air of one who had the right to ask questions. Navarro was either taken in by his manner or distracted enough not to care about it.

“I am here, *señor*, to ask about your involvement in the Museo National,” De Solis said.

Navarro stopped packing for a moment, then shrugged and shoved an extra pair of pants into his battered valise.

“Don’t bother denying it,” de Solis said. And then, lying through his teeth, he added: “I saw the files.”

“Who are you?” Navarro asked.

“Let us say that I worked for the government in 1980 and leave it at that.”

“You worked for Mr. White?”

“Let us say that I worked for another agency and leave it at that.”

This was a good ploy because under the junta there were many undercover agencies within the government, all suspicious and afraid of each other. Kidnappings and murders

were the ways they had jockeyed for power. For all Navarro knew, de Solis could have been referring to a group even more ruthless than the SIDE.

“This is old history, *viejo*,” Navarro said. “You can do nothing about it now.”

Aha, de Solis thought. This meant that the rumors were right about Navarro. De Solis sat down in a chair to continue the conversation in a more collegial tone.

“You needn’t worry,” he said. “These matters are ancient history, as you say. But these two Americans are making a documentary of the incident. They want to know the whole story.”

“Then you tell them, if you know it, because I have nothing to say.”

“Then I will say it for you,” de Solis said.

It was a veiled threat, which Navarro picked up on. He had no idea what this old man knew and what story he would tell. Or what kinds of problems that might cause. He looked at Mo then at Dash. He stopped packing.

...

Mo, with her limited vocabulary, and Dash, with no Spanish at all, had no idea what the two men were saying this whole time. But from the body language they guessed that they were working out their differences. De Solis was studying Navarro silently when the tall man suddenly seemed to have a flash of insight.

It was the first moment in which Navarro realized that these three strangers might actually be able to help him in his quest. He had, in fact, no actual plan for tracking down Perón and the stolen Renoir. He heard that Perón might be living in Miami but this was just gossip. He was going there because he hoped something would come to light. Perhaps these three, also interested in the theft, could help him uncover information. He sat down on the bed.

“What is in it for me?” he asked de Solis.

“What are you after?”

“Something that is rightfully mine.”

“Perhaps we can all get what we want from this if we join forces, so to speak.”

“There is a painting,” Navarro said slowly in English, “a missing one.”

“You mean one of the thirteen that were not returned to the museum?” Mo asked.

“No, another. From the painter Renoir.”

“Girl with a Red Bow?” Mo asked.

“This is the painting, yes. You know it.”

“We know about it.”

“This painting was given to me by the Argentine as...*una recompensa*?”

“A reward,” de Solis translated.

“*Sí*. A reward for my service.”

“They gave you the work to thank you for stealing all the other works?” Mo asked.

But Navarro either could not, or chose not to, understand her and instead of answering, he said in English: “But this painting, it was stolen from me. I am to get it back.”

“This thing is like some kind of artsy hot potato. Who stole it from you?” Dash asked.

“A man I work with in time of the junta. An agent of SIDE.”

“Someone involved in the original heist?” de Solis asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “The little *ratero*! A rat in a sewer. I stomp on his *bolas*!”

“And what is his name, this thief of a thief?”

“Perón,” Navarro spit out.

“*Quien?*” De Solis said, refusing to hear what he heard.

“Fernando Perón,” Navarro said.

If de Solis could have gargled his own tongue in that moment, it would have sounded better than the choking moan that escaped his throat.

...

Somewhere along the line, de Solis might have heard his nephew’s name in connection with the museum heist but he quickly discounted it as one of the many deceptions and lies coming from the government. In a shadow time, glimmers of light appear as ghosts that do not illuminate, as the poet said. You never knew what to believe. But now, so many years later, the whole story of the crime he refused to solve was coming together. Fernando and Navarro had stolen the work under the direction of the junta and had turned the pieces over to Mr. White who had traded them to the Chinese government for arms. Somehow they ended up in private hands.

But this other work, the unknown Renoir, had taken a different route. If Navarro was telling the truth, they gave it to him as a reward and Fernando, his own nephew, had stolen it from him. How could he do such a thing? Had his mind been so poisoned by the junta that he had no moral fiber left? It was possible, de Solis thought. But on the other hand, the idea that Navarro was telling the truth was another ghost that did not illuminate.

“Do you know him?” Mo asked de Solis, observing his expression of concern.

“No,” de Solis lied, since this was all he could muster.

“So then this fellow Perón has the painting now?” Dash asked.

“Yes. I go to him,” Navarro said, tapping the suitcase.

“Where does he live?”

“Miami Beach,” both Navarro and de Solis said in unison.

“Oh no,” Mo said. “Not Miami again. Do you know my father too? Did Manny put you all up to this? What is this, some kind of cosmic joke?”

All three men looked at Mo as though she had just arrived at the wrong party. Realizing that she was losing it, and to recover some dignity, she turned to de Solis and said: “I thought you didn’t know this Perón guy.”

“I do not!” he insisted.

“Then how did you know he was in Miami?”

“A guess, you see?” de Solis fudged. “Yes. Many Argentines lives in Miami Beach.”

“*Sí*. Many,” Navarro agreed, covering for the cop because he did not have to be a genius to see that he needed allies wherever he could find them.

...

“Okay,” Dash said. “We are all looking for the same thing. A painting by Renoir.”

“Yes?” Navarro replied.

“You want to know what happened to it to see if your theory about the oil is right,” he said, looking at de Solis who nodded, simply to be polite.

“And you want to get it back because it belonged to you,” Dash said to Navarro who nodded too.

“And we want to find it in order to finish the documentary.”

They all nodded again even though not a single one of those points was true. And once that was over, they all nodded at each other's nodding, even though not one of them believed that any of the others believed any of it to be true. Nodding as a form of mutual deceit. It was an agreement to distrust and at that point they might just as well have written and signed a contract in disappearing ink.

"So how do we get to Perón?" Mo asked.

"He have a restaurant. With family. Yes, precisely so. A restaurant called *El Secreto*," de Solis said.

Given the general level of dishonesty, no one even bothered to ask de Solis how he could know this about a man he claimed not to know at all.

"Then maybe you should approach him since he already knows Navarro here."

"No, no. This will not go. I am...he will...this is no for me."

De Solis was not yet ready to confess that this man was in fact his own nephew and the people at the restaurant his cousins. And so he said nothing. But Navarro had an idea and spoke up.

"He fondle ladies," Mo heard him say and she replied: "He *does* does he?"

"Yes. He very fond of ladies. A what you say...Latin lover, yes?"

"Fernan is so?" De Solis said without thinking.

He last knew his nephew as a hapless young man, with no future and no plans for the present. Had he really matured enough to seduce women? If so, de Solis was impressed. If anyone noticed that he had used a family nickname for Perón, they chose not say anything.

"In that case, maybe we need someone who might attract his attention," Mo said. "A woman."

Dash eyed her luridly. In fact, he was making fun of the whole idea but Mo did not take it that way.

"Don't look at *me* like that. There is no way that you are suggesting that I..."

"Of course not! Don't be ridiculous," Dash said. But on the other hand, he could not resist the urge to tease her and added: "On the other hand..."

"On the other hand, my foot," she said and was thinking about planting it. But then a new idea erased all that: "What about Blaise Norman?"

"She is pretty striking looking," Dash said.

"This is who?" de Solis asked.

And she wants the painting too, Mo thought.

"Okay," Dash announced, reading her mind in her expression, "maybe we have a friend who can cozy up to him."

"*Kozee*?" Navarro repeated.

"Who can get close to him. Find out about the painting. If he has it and where he keeps it."

"Yes, is good," de Solis said only because it let him off the hook. "A woman. A spy. A Mata Hari."

Navarro stood up and closed his suitcase as if the whole matter was decided. He was ready to go. Then, unexpectedly, he took out a baseball cap and slapped it on his head. The cap had a logo on it...a multicolored M with a pointy swash.

"The Miami Marlins?" Dash said.

"*Sí*. Miami."

“That’s a fine disguise. You look like a real American,” Dash said with great emphasis, to mask the fact that he did not mean a single word.

To Mo, what he looked most like was an alien invader from Mars failing to pass for human. But it did not matter because this alien was now on their team.

...

Sal, the man Mo referred to as Botero, had not gone to Buenos Aires. There would have been no point. Whoever Mo encountered there, or whatever she discovered, would lead her back to the States in any case. It had to. The painting was still here. Or at least the man paying his bills seemed to think so.

Instead, he was sitting at an open-air café on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach, enjoying the intense sun, biding his time, and watching some leggy women walk by. Nursing a cappuccino, he barely moved and without a neck, seemed almost sculptured in place. This was his way of waiting for something to happen. His years in the penitentiary had taught him patience. A kind of stillness of the mind that was more pen than Zen.

He liked to slowly think things through and he guessed, rightly as it turned out, that Mo would return to Miami to see her father and Blaise Norman. Sal did not know everything about the situation. He did not, for example, know anything about Perón, whose restaurant was right down the block from where he was sitting. But he knew that Mo and her boyfriend Dash were working for Blaise Norman and her boyfriend Manny Epstein, and that sooner or later they would have to report back. So he decided to save himself a trip and wait in Florida to pick up the trail again.

From force of habit, as he thought about all this, he tapped the blackjack that he kept in his jacket pocket. It was a long thin lead weight covered in some very nice black leather, used in the good old days to cosh someone on the head. Sal liked it because, since he was on parole, he could not risk carrying a gun. The blackjack was also a token; it put him in touch with some of his neighborhood heroes like Jimmy the Meat. But he never actually used it. He was a stylist and much preferred a good thick beating. That always seemed to make his point so much more clearly.

...

Back in Miami days later, the members of the newly formed Renoir Recovery Club went their separate ways. De Solis and Navarro found rooms at a cheap motel not far from the restaurant. Mo and Dash stayed in separate rooms at the upscale Setai Hotel. This was a stunning Art Deco palace with lowlights and high sheen, spare paintings and the occasional Balinese stone sculpture. Very fancy schmancy, Mo thought.

Dash immediately started taking photos with one of his better cameras. Not of the architecture but of the workers. The room cleaners, the hall vacuumers, the food preppers in the kitchen. More portraits of unseen women. The real people behind the façade. And an expensive one it was. In fact the whole venture was costing Dash a small fortune. They had agreed that Dash would foot the bill but, as instructed by Blaise Norman, he was keeping records and receipts. He would be reimbursed with the first check coming soon. Dash did not seem worried about this, not because he had any faith in the money, but because he was not a worrier. Things usually work out, he told Mo, who had the exact opposite view.

Besides his good looks and warm nature, it was just this warped approach to life that attracted her. He seemed untroubled by events large and small while Mo fretted both the details and the big picture. And while the trip to Argentina had not erased her doubts about him, it did blur them enough to remind her that she was very attracted to him.

To prepare for dinner, she therefore spent too much time at a cosmetics store on Collins Avenue trying to buy just the right shade of lipstick. Lips are red, as everyone knows, tinted by the pigment pheomelanin. But the red of lips was not red enough. Red is the longest wavelength of light that we can see and as such it penetrates. It entices the eye, stirs the heart. Lipstick went even deeper than that, a signal of the color emerging at the mouth. But to say what? Was she trying to tease him or seduce him or allure him or something else? That was not clear to her.

She spent three hours trying on and wiping off different shades. Do It To Me, Sheen Supreme, Redder Than Red, Lusty Licks, Ravenred, Viva Glam, Russian Romance, Dangerous. Each carried a different message, a different vibe. To Mo, this was all an ocean of sensation and pressing it into her lips like that, wiping it off, pressing again...became a kind of lusty massage of her id. She eventually settled on a hue with some fancy name but to her it was O'Keefe Red, color of her amaryllis. Engulfing.

The color worked.

During dinner she noticed that he was looking at her lips and she tried to be careful about showing them off...chew carefully, clean the teeth, keep them plump. It was annoying to have to pay so much attention and so she eventually gave up and just ate. It was the first time in a long time that she was aware of being seen and how exhausting that was.

When she asked to see some of the photos he had taken in Buenos Aires, he handed her the iPhone and then went to the bathroom. She casually flipped through some of the images, complex shots at weird angles, reflections in reflections, glistening or grungy depending on the subject. But rich, textured, odd. She noticed in one of the thumbnails a familiar contour...her own. It was a shot of her profile, dark and mysterious as she sat in the taxi, the lights of the street glowing behind. Nice shot. Then she flipped to the one before. Her again, looking into the camera. And the one before that. Her again.

As she scanned through the images on the phone, there was only one particular subject that appeared over and over again. Her face. She had not even been aware that he was taking these photos. A glance, a frown, a close-up on her lips, her eyes, the curls of her hair. They had been to Brooklyn, to Boston, to Argentina, to Miami. He had the photos to prove it. But from the collection on his phone, his personal camera, one would guess that all he saw in all that time was her.

...

After dinner, they sat at the pool under the mild night sky, skin glimmered by the lights under the water. They had taken drinks with them and were sitting in two lounge chairs. There was a moment of silence. Dash stood up as though he was going somewhere, and he was. Closer to her. He sat down on her lounge and touched her hair. He was handsome in that light and Mo felt her shield dropping. He looked in her eyes and thought he saw a message there. He was not wrong. He slowly moved in towards her, his face close to hers. She had been aware of her own lips all evening and now she sensed that they were about to be touched by his. It was electric, this feeling. Like ruby. She did

not close her eyes as they do in the movies but instead watched his, so deep. Closer still she could feel the heat of his skin like a caress. And then their lips touched. So soft but with delicious pressure, their lips mingled, an erotic tangle building. They lingered there, not wanting to feel anything else but this one kiss, this connection through touching lips, this...

Her phone was ringing.

She tried to ignore it, but of course it was impossible. Plus, the phone was in her pocket, which meant she had to stand up, unbutton the jacket, and pull it out from inside. Replacing the kiss that seemed so enveloping moments before was Nabi's voice on the phone asking: "So...how is it going?"

"It was going fine."

"Oh good. Have you kissed him yet?"

"Sort of."

"What does that mean?"

"Listen, I have to go..."

"I wanted to ask you, when are you coming back?"

"I am back. I'm in Miami."

"I mean back to New York, to the apartment. I don't want to pressure you but Rashid wants to move in before the wedding. You said you were looking for an apartment, right?"

"As soon as I get back. I'll have to call you later..."

"Oh and you got a job offer. Someone left a message."

"Someone? Who?"

"She said her name was something Campion. Very impressed by you, wants you to come work for her at the museum. You should take it."

"Life is bizarre. Why?"

"Because you will need the income to pay for the rent on your own place."

Mo ended the call but the interlude went on for long enough to kill the mood. Yet as Dash watched her standing by the pool, her counterbalanced figure in that dark jacket and pants was turned into a violet silhouette by the lights. Silhouettes are only interesting when there are details along the edge. And there were. He studied the curls of her hair, the cut of her shoulders, the jacket pocket flap sticking out, all the edges that made her fascinating. He did not even try to take a photo. It was too beautiful to record. He was hoping to get her to come up to his room that night. The phone call had interrupted that. But now, seeing her standing there and realizing that he was not just attracted to her, he actually cared for her, he changed his mind. Love, if it came, sex, if it happened, would all work themselves out. More important was proving to her that he could be trusted. He would not hurt her. He would not betray her.

Not if he could help it.

...

"My one and only," Manny said, arms wide as he ushered them into the apartment.

Mo allowed him to hug her by way of saying hello. Blaise was standing behind him, wearing a jogging suit in a shade of pink that felt like needles.

"We have a situation," Mo said. "We know who has the painting."

“You darlings!” Blaise said. “Manny, you were right about her. She is one sharp little babe.”

“I never said that,” Manny protested, turning to Mo. “I said you were a smart little *bubeleh*. She knows not from Yiddish.”

“Fine,” Mo said. “Whatever. Look...we know who has the painting but we have to be careful about approaching him. It’s a little tricky.”

“Oh?”

“He’s from Argentina but he lives here in Miami. He owns a restaurant called *El Secreto*.”

“I know that place. We’ve been there, remember?” Manny said. “It’s a good place.”

“You had that *asado* stuff. You got heartburn.”

“No I didn’t.”

“I went to the pharmacy, don’t you remember?”

“That was from the Cuban place...”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Mo interrupted, “but we have a situation here. We need a way to approach this guy if we want to get the painting.”

“Get it *back*,” Blaise corrected.

“Yes, well, his name is Fernando Perón.”

“Perón? Like *Evita*?” Blaise asked as she raised her forearms in the air to mimic the famous gesture from the Broadway show.

“He likes women,” Dash said.

“Who doesn’t?” Manny said. “So what?”

“We’re thinking that an attractive woman might be able to talk to him and find out where the painting is.”

There was silence for a moment while this suggestion sank in.

“You’re not suggesting sending my only daughter in to...”

“No,” Dash said. “That wouldn’t work. This Perón guy is like this old...”

“Bottle of wine!” Mo interjected. “Sophisticated. Mature.”

But Blaise without even a hint of concern said: “Looks like I am going into *con mode* one more time.”

“She means the commode,” Manny said, covering and shooing her away. “Go if you have to go. Don’t announce.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Sure,” Manny said. “Well that’s not going to happen.”

“Sweetie, we’re at the end of the road here. One man is standing in the way of our success. If I can use my feminine wiles to win him over and get our little old painting back, then let’s get going.”

“Over my dead bloated...”

“Well who is going to talk to him then? You in drag?”

This was an image Mo did not want in her head.

“All she has to do is talk to him,” Mo said. “Pretend to be an art dealer or something. Get a sense of whether he really does have the painting. And maybe where he keeps it. Then we can figure out what to do next.”

“This sounds creepy to me,” Manny said. “What if he is dangerous? What if he tries to seduce her?”

“Honey, I can take care of myself. I ain’t nothing like the delicate flower I seem to be.”

...

At his motel, de Solis bounced once on the bed and decided he would sleep in the chair. He tested the water and decided not to take a shower. Turned up the air conditioning to drown out the sound of cars on the street, then called his wife to tell her how dandy the accommodations were and that everything was just fine. Then, making sure that the lights in Navarro’s room were still on, he slipped out of the motel and walked to the restaurant a few blocks away.

When his turn came to be admitted, he stood in front of his nephew for several minutes before he recognized him. Fernando was a mature fellow now, handsome and refined. Well dressed. He spoke English to some customers, Spanish to others. He took his time. He was nothing like the jittery kid de Solis had to help get out of jams with the cops. De Solis, on the other hand, looked the same as ever.

“Uncle Marco? What are you doing here? No one told me you were visiting.”

“*Un asunto importante,*” de Solis whispered. “Can we talk?”

In the office, de Solis explained what he knew about the original heist and the unknown Renoir. He described all this slowly, with some pride, as the ex-policeman who had been thorough in his clues. He told his nephew about how Navarro had been given the painting as a gift from the junta and that he knew Perón had stolen the painting from him and did not blame him for that. He carefully outlined how Navarro was here in Miami and determined to get the painting back. And finally he told his nephew about the two Americans who were also after the work, for reasons he himself did not fully understand. Yet.

“All these people are after your painting, Fernan,” de Solis summed in Spanish. “You are in a bad situation.”

Astounded by all this, Perón sat down and brooded. Not about the facts themselves, which were wrong in any case, but about the soap opera that had developed around his impulsive act. Taking *The Girl with the Red Bow* in the first place had been a mistake that had colored, not just his own life, but that of many others. Stealing it back from Wan, far from concluding the whole business, had apparently made things even worse. A single action could bend fate in such a way. This was sobering.

“No matter,” Perón said, choosing not to explain himself. “I am not staying here in Miami. I am going home, uncle.”

“Home?”

“Yes. Back to Buenos Aires. We are opening another restaurant there. I will manage it.”

“When do you go?”

“Sooner than expected, I suppose, if what you are saying is true.”

“Then they will all follow you there. They have followed you here, after all. You cannot run from this. These people want the painting just as much as you did...and look what you were willing to do for it.”

A moment’s reflection proved to Perón that his uncle was right.

“What should I do?” he asked.

“Give it to me, Fernan. I will hold onto it for you. If Navarro knows you have it, he might kill you for it. And the Americans perhaps too. I do not trust what they are telling me. So give it to me and at the proper time, I will turn it over to the police. I will not mention your name at all.”

The image that formed in Perón’s mind was of his little girl behind bars. This was a silly fantasy of course, but in some way accurate. She might end up in an airless vault for years while the international legalities of the case were decided. The thought was unbearable but given the situation, Perón knew that he had to make a dire decision.

He had loved the little girl from the start, longed for her when she was gone, lived with her and without her for years. He had made many stupid decisions because of this but he did not regret any of them. If life was in any way about pleasure, then he had that in his own, and that was all anyone could hope for. Yet he also knew that every story had an end, every relationship, every love. This was the way of the world. And the moment had arrived now for him. It was time.

It was time to let her go.

Perón asked his assistant to run things as he and de Solis went back to his apartment. With his uncle sitting in the front room admiring the wood on a laminated table, he rummaged around in the closet for several minutes putting things together. When Perón returned, he handed the pizza box to his uncle. The expression on his face was an odd mix of grief and relief. As he watched the older man leave with the box, his years of yearning now seemed to him to be the traits of a younger man he no longer knew. The decision was right and he quickly pulled himself together to make one more stop, to finish what he had started.

De Solis walking back to his motel room had a grin on his face. He was carrying the box horizontally in both hands meaning, to his mind, respectfully. But from a short distance he looked like any portly retiree carrying a small pizza home for dinner.

...

“So what, you’re now going to be some kind of femme fatale?” Manny asked.

“Now hush, hon. I’m not any such thing. I am just going to be sociable and find out where the little girl is. That’s all.”

“Well I’m coming with you. I don’t like this one bit.”

“Now our little old Romeo here won’t be very interested in me if I have a babysitter.”

“I don’t care. It’s too risky. I’m coming.”

“We can all go,” Dash suggested. “The three of us as a group. We could just be out for a nice family dinner.”

“Good. That way we can keep an eye on you,” Manny said.

“I’ll make reservations,” Dash said. “One single. One group of three.”

That seemed more comforting for Manny who thought for a moment and said to Blaise: “Maybe you should tell him that you’re Carmen Lake.”

“I can’t do that...suppose he knows her.”

“Then tell him you know her.”

“Suppose he checks?”

“Maybe it will shake the painting out of him.”

“I’ll shake, don’t worry.”

“Who the hell is Carmen Lake,” Mo and Dash asked in chorus.

“Never mind,” Manny and Blaise sang back.

Blaise getting ready for her performance the following night was like a diva pruning. She sat down before the mirror and carefully worked out her dramatic mascara, her hair pouf, her glossy lips. When she presented herself in a tightish black dress, she seemed like a younger, more playful version of herself. Bouncier, if that was even possible.

She was also playing her cleavage up to the hilt and took great care to mold the mounds into an impressive fleshy pillow. It looked to Mo like a tushe under her chin but Dash seemed entranced by it. Manny too.

“Men love boobs, darlin,” Blaise said, slapping them up and in. “Give them boobs and they become dribbling idiots. Am I wrong, hon?”

Dash smiled wanly, very much like a dribbling idiot. Manny too.

“Boobs!” Mo declared. “Aren’t you sick of boobs? I’m sick of boobs.”

“Guys never get sick of boobs, sweetie,” Blaise said. “They’re faithful in that way.”

“TV is all boobs. Movies too,” Mo complained. “That’s all you ever see. Big booby boobs. Boobs! Even the word “boobs” looks like boobs.”

“You have nice boobs, Mo,” Blaise said. “It’s a gift. You just don’t use them.”

“Oh, really?” Mo said, looking down. “Thanks.”

“Really nice,” Dash added.

“Can we go already?” Manny said. “I’m hungry.”

NINE

“When in doubt wear red.”
Bill Blass

When Navarro finally arrived at the restaurant, Perón did not seem the least bit surprised. This was in part, of course, because his uncle had warned him. But it was also due to his sense that no matter how he changed himself he would always somehow be haunted by his past. While he had not done the terrible things others in the secret service had, he still looked on his history as a series of sins for which he had to atone. Navarro, in that light, looked like a grim phantom. Like fate calling.

As it was not yet time to open for dinner, Perón ushered his former partner over to the bar where they sat on stools like two friends catching up, which was true except for the friends part. To keep things familiar, Perón began the conversation in Spanish.

“I knew you would come,” Perón said.

“It has been a long time, *che*,” Navarro said, gazing around the room. “You have done well. You have changed.”

“Yes, I hope so. And what about you? I see that you are still tall and lean.”

“Some things do not change.”

“Are you still in the *acquisition* business?”

This was a barb but Navarro was a bit too dense to see that. His vocabulary was one of the things that had not improved.

“I have my work,” he said blankly.

“And your anger at the world for cheating you? Has that changed?”

“Enough talk,” Navarro said. “You know why I am here.”

“No Castoro, I do not know.”

No one had called Navarro that since he was a boy and his father was about to beat him for some petty crime. But he was not a boy any longer and he did not miss his father at all. The name stung him and to show his rage, he switched to English.

“Shut up Perón and do what I tell you to do. As before.”

“You may be the same,” Perón said, “but the world is different. We are older men now, not young agents of the junta. And you are not my superior.”

Navarro pulled out the gun he had stuck into the belt of his pants in the back. It was the same gun he had with him the last time they met in Rosario. He did not use it then and Perón doubted that he would use it now. But he could not be sure. Navarro did not budge or get up from the stool but held the gun at his waist and pointed it at Perón. He seemed desperate sitting there like that but not less dangerous.

“As I said,” Navarro repeated, “some things do not change.”

“What do you want, Castoro?”

“You know what I want.”

“Money?”

“I want the painting you stole from me.”

“The painting,” Perón said, pretending to be surprised. He knew this was coming but actually hearing these words from the taut lips of his former colleague in crime almost made him laugh. Like a wolf demanding the finest wine. “You mean that Renoir of the little girl?”

“Of course I do. What else? I want it back.”

“Let me understand you, *old friend*. After all these years, you want the painting by Renoir back because you think that I stole it from you.”

“Stop talking and start to getting it,” Navarro said, shaking the gun at Perón’s stomach.

“It is absurd, Navarro. Completely absurd,” Perón said, switching back to Spanish. “We stole sixteen works from the museum and you ended up with all of them. I took one other one that *you* lifted from my apartment. And yet you have come here to get it because you say that I stole it from you.”

“The facts of the matter are of no matter to me, Perón. I know you have it. It is not among the works reported stolen or among those returned. The painting was in my possession and I was cheated out of the price for it. I was young and stupid and did not know what I know now. That it is a worth a fortune. Now I want it back. Plain and simple, even for one such as yourself who has *changed so much*.”

“But I do not have it, Navarro. I did. It was mounted right over there on that wall for a while,” he said, pointing casually to the table in the corner. “But I gave to it my uncle for safekeeping. He warned me that you might come.”

“Do not feed me lies. What uncle is this?”

“My uncle Marco. Marco de Solis.”

“What? De Solis?”

”He was the policeman in charge of the investigation back in 1980.”

“De Solis is your uncle,” Navarro said with great restraint, trying not to sound shocked.

“Yes. My uncle. It was he who helped me get into the SIDE. He came here yesterday to warn me about you and about the Americans. So I gave the painting to him for safekeeping.”

“*Mal parido!*”

“Perhaps. But this one has the painting you are so fond of.”

Navarro was too annoyed to get angry. The little cop had tricked him with his kindly act. No more games. Now it was everyone for themselves. Screw the Americans and de Solis too. He put the gun back in his belt and stood up, looming over Perón who was still seated.

“You stay around here, Fernan. I will find your uncle and see if you are telling the truth.”

It was a threat but Perón did not seem upset by it.

“I am not going anywhere, my old friend. I run this restaurant. I am not on the run. Not any more.”

“Nor am I,” Navarro said.

...

Dinner that evening at *El Secreto* was no spy movie. On the contrary, it could have been shot by a mediocre student in a film program at NYU. The acting was lousy, the

dialogue stilted, and the lighting too dark. Mo, Dash, and Manny were seated awkwardly near the far wall where they could see the rest of the room. But far from playing it cool, Manny was glaring at Blaise, who was seated alone at a small table in the corner under a bad painting of some city in the rain. He looked like a spy who had failed his stealth classes.

Blaise however was acting out her part convincingly. She had already caught Perón's attention coming in, projecting a few gigahertz of mature estrogen in his direction. In the short time between being greeted and being seated, she had already informed him that she was an art collector from Texas interested in paintings and by her manner, jewelry, and gestures, that she was rich.

The dinner passed by uneventfully except that Manny ate nothing and never took his eyes off of Blaise. As the evening was winding down and only a few patrons remained, Perón found the time to join Blaise for a drink at her table. He had a Viña Cobos "Cobos" Malbec delivered along with two fancy glasses with etched grapes. They talked for quite a while but no amount of leaning in and cupping his ears helped Manny overhear what they were saying. When the others decided to leave, he balked.

"I'm not leaving her here with him," he said to Mo. "What if he puts the moves on her?"

"Moves?"

"You know."

"Stay if you want," Mo said. "I'm going to sleep. Call me if there's any news."

"I'll go back with you," Dash said.

Perón had indeed put the moves on her and Blaise played along but as the last few tables were being cleared, she steered the conversation back to art, the whole point of the charade in the first place.

"For someone with such refined taste, sir," Blaise said. "I'd expect more from you than this kinda thing."

She tapped the image hanging on the wall over the table.

"Some street art an employee purchased. I have to replace it."

"Yes well, it certainly is no Renoir!"

"You mention Renoir. You admire Renoir?"

"Yes I do. His young girls? To die for. I had one for a while."

"Did you?"

"I had a – what would you call it? - a crush on a Renoir painting. I miss it dearly. A young girl with a red bow in her hair. You know the work?"

"Alas I am a poor restaurateur and this is all I can afford."

"I heard that you collected art."

"Who told you this?"

"Oh, word gets around."

"I have had in my possession certain works that I loved from time to time."

"A Renoir maybe? I think I see a teeny little twinkle in those eyes."

"Perhaps. But no more. A man has to learn to part with his passions in due time."

"Well, not all of them I hope," Blaise said not very coyly.

When she was ready to leave, Perón offered to walk her home. As he helped her on with her coat, a bit too intimately and slowly, Manny jumped up and was ready to pounce but Blaise signaled for him to back off. She felt she was getting closer to an answer.

It was a lovely warm night, the kind lovers love to love in. To the naïve eye, they might very well have been a couple slowly wending towards an intimate end. The sound of Blaise Norman's heels tapping the sidewalk was like cooing to Perón. He held her arm; she let him. She made sure that her breasts jiggled. He noticed. Manny meanwhile tracked them in the dark very ineptly.

"There might be someone else interested in this painting too," Blaise said.

"This seems to be a very popular work. Who do you mean?"

"A certain Carmen Lake." Blaise offered.

Perón flinched at that.

"Do you mean *carmine* lake?" he asked.

"Well no doubt I do," Blaise said laughing and slapping his shoulder. "Do you know her?"

He laughed too and said: "But this carmine lake is not a woman."

"A man then?"

"It is a color. A red color."

"I'm not following along with you here my darlin," Blaise said.

"Renoir used a red color called carmine lake."

"A color," Blaise mused. "But I was told she could cause problems."

"Oh yes, yes this is true. This color is made from the crushed and ground bodies of the cochineal insects that live on cactuses in Mexico. It was popular during the time he painted. He was a fan of the color. But it was not stable, this color. Even in his own day, people saw his reds fading."

"The problem," Blaise said, suddenly realizing it, "is that his reds have faded!"

"Yes. The experts, they look at parts of canvases that were protected by the frame to see if there are differences. The reds that were protected from the light and air are much deeper and richer. His carmine lake reds were redder once."

"Like the red bow on our little girl," Blaise said.

"Sí, no doubt. It is somewhat sad, yes? The color is not what it was."

"It is sad, no," Blaise said. "I mean, saddle my pony. That is such a darn relief you have no idea."

...

The next morning, they gathered at Manny's apartment for breakfast. In his mind, he was hosting a criminal buffet, which was thrilling. He carefully laid out the bagels and bialys, the cream cheese, the lox, the potato salad, the chopped liver and the rest of the spread as though it were a scale model of the bank they were about to hit. He poured mimosas into colorful plastic tumblers. He made sure everyone had what they needed in order to better focus on the issue at hand.

"I don't think our boy has the darn thing," Blaise said.

"Good. Great. Done. He doesn't have it," Manny said to signal an end to that line of attack. "What about Carmen Lake?"

"Oh well, you can stop worrying about her. She's no she at all. She's nothing but a little old color."

“A color?”

“Our dear Mister Perón informs me that carmine lake is a color Renoir used. It fades over time. That’s the problem it causes.”

“Ah!” Mo said. “Makes sense. That bow is a quiet red, like a gentle tap on the skin. But Renoir was more daring than that so I’ll bet that red once tingled. Maybe even quivered.”

“It’s not just the bow then,” Dash added. “There’s red throughout, mixed with other colors. If it fades, it changes everything.”

“Right,” Mo agreed. “A redder red would make the whole painting vibrate. Like a vibrator.”

“A vibrator? Could our little girl have lost her innocence?” Blaise asked.

When the doorbell rang, no one was expecting the delivery that came. It was not the morning newspaper and not the herring in cream sauce that Manny forget to buy.

It was de Solis.

He was carrying, of all things, a box of pizza.

“This is Marco de Solis,” Dash said by way of introduction, “the policeman we met in Buenos Aires.”

“Precisely so,” he said and, with more drama than anyone would have expected, placed the box ceremoniously on the table.

He might have been offering another appetizer but the look of satisfaction on his face suggested otherwise. He tapped the lid twice.

“Pizza for breakfast?” Manny said. “Maybe in Argentina, *amigo*, but here in Miami...”

“This you will like,” de Solis said.

Dash lifted the lid to reveal a package made of white paper. The size and thickness of it hinted at the treasure within.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Blaise said. “Is this our little Renoir?”

De Solis nodded humbly. Took a slight bow too.

“Holy crap!” Manny said. “And just how the hell did you get it?”

De Solis made a gesture like twisting a screwdriver into his own brain. This only made sense in South America where it indicated cleverness. Everyone in the room thought it referred to a loose screw.

“Okay then,” Dash said. “So we finally have it. What do we do next?”

“Return it. Precisely so,” de Solis announced.

“Hold on there just a Texas second,” Blaise said. “Return it to whom?”

“*La policía*,” de Solis said.

It was his only way of thinking. His world was divided into cops, crooks, and bystanders. You were one or the other; there was nothing else.

“No,” Mo said. “This should go back to its rightful owner.”

“And who might that be?”

“The National Museum?”

“Rightful owner? But this here little painting was never reported as stolen. Isn’t that true?” Blaise asked.

“That’s right,” Dash offered. “The museum never reported it. You told us that yourself, Marco.”

“So how do you know how they got it in the first place? At least we really own it,” Blaise said.

“And how do we know that exactly?” Mo asked.

Blaise walked out of the room and came back with a folder containing several sheets of paper. The first she held up was a handsome page with a fancy heading that said Proof of Legal Possession; it was signed by her and Wan and notarized. It was very nice. But Mo, ever wary, took it from her hand and actually read it.

“All this says is that you affirm that you had it in your possession,” Mo said.

“And we do, hon, we really do. And then there is this...”

Blaise presented another document from Ervine Crispus stating that the work, in his view, was a real Renoir. Mo studied that too.

“This doesn’t say anything about you owning the work.”

“Right there, hon,” Blaise said pointing. “In the possession of Ms Blaise Norman.”

“There you go,” Manny agreed.

“I was wrong,” Mo said. “This is no criminal enterprise. It’s a gaggle of dupes.”

“It is no difference,” de Solis said. “The police can decide this.”

“It’s a pretty shady deal,” Manny weighed in. “The museum obviously got it under questionable circumstances. That’s why they never looked for it. They probably stole it in the first place.”

“*Impossible!*” de Solis insisted.

“Look my friend,” Manny said. “Somewhere along the line, everything is stolen. All art is stolen. Almost every painting ever made was stolen from the artist. They don’t make the big bucks on it. When rich people pay millions for art, how do you think they got the cash? By stealing it from everyone else....”

Manny went on like this for a few minutes, rather passionately, with a speech about inequality, liberty, freedom and the rape of culture by the rich. It was a speech Mo recalled hearing from her youth whenever her father needed to justify his life of scams. It was his way of shifting character when it was convenient...from Charles Ponzi to Tom Joad in a few choice phrases. It was a resounding call for equity and when he was done the quiet was resounding too.

“Great. Fine,” Mo said after a while. “Noted. What about you Blaise? What would you do with it?”

“What we intended right from the start, darlings,” Blaise answered. “I propose that we sell it or hypothecate it and use the money to help people. That’s what our little old charity is all about.”

“Help the right people,” Manny said, meaning himself. But a glance from Blaise forced a correction. “I mean...right! Help people.”

“This is ridiculous,” Mo announced. “We don’t even know if this is really real. Who the hell is Ervine Crispus?”

As Blaise outlined what, to her, were his qualifications, Dash idly and slowly, and for no particular reason, began to peel back the paper inside the pizza box. His expression as he stared down at the contents drew Mo’s attention and she looked too.

One by one they all did.

No one said a word.

Because lying there in the white paper inside the pizza box was just what anyone with any sense would have expected to find. Namely, no painting at all. Instead there was a

nice hardcover coffee table book on the life and work of the great Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir. To make matters worse, the book had a hand-written sticker on the front that read: \$4.99.

“*Hijo de puta!*” de Solis said, even though the curse insulted his own sister.

“You said it,” Manny said, even though he spoke no Spanish.

...

It was another sunny May day outside in southern Florida, the kind that hits like a sauna when New Yorkers get off the plane but is merely balmy to residents. Down in the land of palms and sandals, an ordinary day, if the day was ordinary. But that was clearly not the case for the group standing feebly around a book in a pizza box. Somehow in the middle of all those plans and schemes, a priceless painting, if it was indeed priceless, had gotten misplaced. Slipped through their fingers. Or stolen one more time, if that was one’s frame of mind.

They went to the restaurant of course, only to be told that Señor Perón had returned to Argentina and was not coming back. They might have tried to track him down but that seemed pointless. He knew they were all after the painting and after a lifetime of commitment to it, they doubted he would let it be taken from him again.

De Solis, having had his fill of life outside his own home, went back to his motel room to pack. The others, in a bit of a daze, headed back to Manny’s apartment. They walked slowly, solemnly as though from an unveiling, in a single line. Mo was leading the way carrying the pizza box under her arm. She was looking for a trash pail in which to deposit it when a tall figure appeared, blocking the path. He was standing with his back to the sunlight, which made it hard to see him. But the long angular shadow he cast, not to mention the logic of their little narrative, made his identity clear.

“Where it is?” Navarro demanded.

“Who knows,” Mo said. “Who cares?”

“I do,” Navarro insisted. “Where?”

“No idea, *amigo*,” Dash said. “Your guess is as good as ours. Hopefully better.”

“Who the hell is this?” Manny asked.

Navarro, never able to deal with complexity, reverted to his lifelong comfort zone and pulled out the gun. He had no idea who to point it to and so he waved it around like a drunken assassin.

“See for yourself,” Mo said and opened the pizza box to reveal nothing.

Navarro slapped the box out of her hand and onto the sidewalk.

“Hey, that’s littering!” Manny protested but Blaise put her hand on his shoulder to restrain him.

“Where painting is?” Navarro asked again.

“Go and ask Perón. He had it last.”

“We go now,” Navarro said and tipped his gun down the street back towards the restaurant. “You. You. You. You. Me.”

“Look pal,” Mo said. “I’m tired. I’m fed up. I’m sick of this whole thing. I don’t have a job, I don’t have place to live, I don’t like traveling, and I don’t even like Renoir all that much. So why don’t you...”

Navarro suddenly grabbed her shoulder with his free hand and raised the gun slightly towards her face. Dash thought to react but as Navarro was closer and already had her in

his grip, he hesitated, thinking the gun might go off. No one moved. No one knew quite what to do next.

But in the end, it did not matter.

In a blur of motion that was hard to understand at first, Navarro was hit by something, a wrecking ball or a cartoon animal maybe, and he went crashing into a fence. The gun skidded down the sidewalk where Dash quickly retrieved it. Navarro was flat out on the ground and sitting on top of him was Botero. The sidewalk had not actually crumpled under his weight but it might just as well have. Rather daintily for such a thick fellow, Botero got up and straightened his jacket, then calmly walked over to Dash and took the gun.

“Don’t fool around,” he said to Dash.

“Who are you?” Mo asked.

“Sallie!” Manny said. “I wondered what happened to you.”

“You’ve been following me,” Mo said, and then to the others: “This is the guy who has been following me.”

“Sure ting,” he said. “I was hired to watch ya.”

“Hired? By whom?”

“Y’fadder,” he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of Manny.

“What?”

“I was nervous for you,” Manny said. “So I asked Sallie to watch out for you. Make sure nothing happened.”

“We was cellmates up in Fishkill. Helluva guy,” Sal Fatello said, slapping Manny on the back. “Asked me t’look out for ya. Like I done here.”

“Thanks Sallie,” Manny said.

“Hey Manny, how’s they hangin?”

Manny put his thin arm over Sallie’s beefy shoulder the way a boy would caress a buffalo and walked him to the side for a private conversation.

“Listen, Sallie, about the money. It’s gonna take a little longer than I thought. But I got a great new deal for you that you are going to love...”

...

When he returned home, de Solis saw that Carmina had mounted his citation for years of service on the wall over the couch. This displeased him but he said nothing. She could not know then, because he never told her, that the fine citation was a joke. True, he had a grand arrest record but that was only because he had defied the army. When he heard of fellow citizens under suspicion, he shuffled paper and found the means to arrest them before the army could kidnap them; he kept them in jail for a few days, then released them when the secret services had moved on to new victims. Files on his neighbors got lost and found in a complex game of strategy to both uphold and undermine the rule of law. At the same time, he had arranged schedules so that he never seemed to have quite enough policemen on duty to arrest the demonstrators in the Plaza de Mayo. His tiny ways of opposing the junta. The citation was a farce but perhaps not his tenure as a chief inspector in a lawless time.

Dropping grumpily onto the couch, de Solis brooded not so much about the certificate but about what turned out to be his final case. It was only then that he realized he had never actually seen the painting that was the subject of so much passion. In fact, he had

no curiosity about it at all. Art, artists, artwork...these were fine interests for finer men. To him, the painting was not an object to be admired; it was simply a clue in a mystery, nothing more. It was the thing the thieves were after and might just as well have been a bar of silver or a fancy watch. The fact that it had slipped through his hands did not make him angry but only deflated and feeling unneeded.

Seeing this, Carmina decided against telling her husband about her own little secret. The white scarf she kept in the drawer in the bedroom. She knew he had seen it when he placed his citation under it and must have wondered about it. But he never asked, and she never explained, though she suspected that he knew it was the scarf worn by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. It proved that she was one of them. The wife of a cop protesting the Dirty War! It was absurd. She had been waiting for him to conclude his investigation before explaining why she, a woman without children, had secretly marched with the Mothers. But how could she not support these women against the brutal regime?

Perhaps he would understand, Carmina thought, or maybe not. But seeing him sitting in his favorite chair looking so sad like that, she put off any discussions of the dark days under the junta and chose instead to make de Solis his favorite Cumin Pork and Sweet Potato Guiso. She even threw in some Chimichurri Sauce to ease his pain. It worked. His mood improved and after a while he began watching old Sherlock Holmes movies with one of his young cousins just for fun.

Navarro eventually peeled himself up from the sidewalk and stood alone on the street for a long time trying to figure out what to do next. He seemed then to have lost everything but was comforted by the idea that he had nothing much to lose in the first place. There, in the fading light as it turned the windows all around him gold and the calcite in the sidewalk into a sparkly carpet, he decided his future was in Florida. He eventually found work at the local Argentinean restaurant, *El Secreto*, doing dishes and cutting the meat.

Manny and Blaise went back to their quiet lives in Miami, eating out, walking on the beach, going shopping, and searching for the next way to pump dollars into the foundation and leave a legacy for Manny's beloved daughter, now that she was back in his life.

...

In New York by the end of the month, Dash was having a fund-raising gala and opening for some of the new work. Friends of Renoir; the place, not the man. For this, Mo wore a red dress. As if there was any choice. Red like the dress Marilyn Monroe wore in *Niagara*, a throb in the lungs. It was a going away present from Nabi, desperate to get her out. Not a hint but an outright plea. The dress had to be altered to fit Mo's smaller frame but it hugged her hips and made some cleavage and Mo tried not to feel self-conscious when men stared. Dash was wearing a black silk T-shirt and a tuxedo jacket in a color that hit her like his kiss by the pool...embracing, magnetic. Together, as he introduced her to friends and patrons, they looked like the perfect ad for an expensive vodka.

There were new abstract paintings there, new sculptures, and one new huge photograph hanging from the pipes running along the ceiling. It was a grand black and white photo with silvery tones. Gleamy. A woman's face, half hidden by shadows, half glowing in neon light. Like a studio shot from old Hollywood. It took Mo a moment to

realize that it was a photo of her. The one Dash had taken in the taxi down in Buenos Aires.

The photo was a bit of a shock.

Mo knew that he had been taking the pictures but did not expect one of them to be on display like that. Was it a compliment or some kind of highjacking? Men and their images of women. What did de Kooning, Renoir, or even Dash know about women anyway? Their pictures were all about the surfaces, the façades, the way they saw women as explosive or seductive or alluring or radiant. Innocent or guilty. Angelic or demonic, take your pick. Hair that teased, breasts that heaved, eyes that winked. What did they know about the inner truths, about having your period or wrestling with your hair or wanting to be wanted? There was nothing in the portraits of real expectations, true yearnings, private hopes and regrets. Women on the walls were nothing more than phantoms posing in an endless mirror-hall of male desire.

No matter, she thought. It was all illusion anyway, the lies of the image. That was not *her* up there in any case. Only a ghost floating in his imagination that he found a way to fix. A bunch of colors that poked; lustrous grays that felt like fingertips pressing.

Not a bad sensation actually. And maybe she was even flattered that he noticed her at all, that he cared to look at her that carefully, which meant, in some way, that he cared for her. Cared enough to look and take and fix and mount and press. Maybe, she thought, it was time to stop judging, stop pulling away, and instead time to start pressing back.

“Hedy Lamarr,” he said. “That’s who you look like. It’s a new series I’m calling Seen Women.”

“It’s a great shot,” Mo said. “But you have to take it down.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I can’t look at myself like that. It’s too...much of me.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. I’ll have my people take it down immediately.”

Of course, he had no people.

“Well, I guess it’s fine for tonight. I’ll just go stand over there and try to not notice it.”

“Maybe you need a break from it. Some distance. Why don’t you come upstairs for a while.”

“What’s upstairs?”

“An apartment I use. But the photo won’t be there. And we can get away from all these people too.”

“In other words, come up and see your Renoir?”

“If you like.”

...

Deep inside there is red.

Inside that bluish aura of breath, the gale green of hope, the ebony shimmer of wanting and not getting. The silver of intention. Deeper than all of that, in the inner chambers of desire, there is red. Not just in the blood or in the marrow. And not in the heart alone. But in the fire, the heat of living, inside the roiling passions of needing to be touched.

In there, red surged.

As she kissed him and pressed her lips against his, this red that was inside of her began to deepen and widen and swell. They moved their lips around each other and licked their tongues. And still the red reddened. She felt his fingertips along her neck and

in the depression at the small of her back and his body against hers, the rising of the heat throughout her and at the same time the wetness moving downward. Fire and water gushing.

He ran his fingers through her hair and pulled her face even closer and their nipples touched and the red became an inner light that overwhelmed all others, all sensations and sounds and thoughts and doubts. She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him closer and closer and deeper into her lips. The red spread like molten heat throughout her and this flowed down to her other lips that bulged from the pressure. Red like the wedding dress of a Vietnamese bride, red like a red carpet at the Oscars, red like the penetrating red of a rose, like a cherry on a sundae, like an Autumn leaf quivering in the wind...

His head was between her breasts then; he was inhaling her smell and he was swollen with red. She was too and imagined their reds mingling, swirling together, creating a new color never seen before in the wide world.

She pulled the dress up to her waist and pulled her panties off and he moved closer. So close. The heat rose. They were both ready, but he stopped for a moment and looked into her eyes. There was a pause. He was waiting for permission maybe or only slowing everything down so that it would not be over too fast. He had warm eyes, dark eyes, but they were red to her, a hidden red of burning and longing and she spread her legs and held him in her hand to guide him in, inside of her. She felt the fleshy bulb part her lips and herself opening to receive it. Wide, wider, and widening, he slipped into her, into her deep deep redness all hot around him, coiling and moist. He was still looking at her eyes but now he was outside of her and inside of her at the same time. She was filled up with red, bursting with red, and then the red that swirled went dark as a dream and then he was fully in and they stayed there like that, mingled reds, for a very long time before they actually began to make love.

...

If she could see with those pale eyes that gazed so directly ahead, she would have noticed another portrait on the far wall. Another young girl holding flowers. A sister in oil. That would be comforting. So might the thickset figure by Botero further down the hallway, watching over her. And the other details of her location – the color of the walls, the ambient sounds, the controlled temperature – would all be familiar too, had she the ears and skin to sense them.

Who knows?

Perhaps even painted girls know where they are and when.

She had arrived several weeks earlier wrapped in white paper and inside a package with no return address. The package sat in the mailroom for days when it arrived, on top of letters and a few other packages, then slowly buried under more mail.

When one of the office assistants finally got to it, she did not think twice about opening it up. She was new to the job and not cautious enough to be nervous about a mysterious package like that. Perhaps she assumed from the size and heft that it was a catalog of some kind or a signed book for an upcoming exhibition. Nothing more dangerous. That it might be an actual painting did not cross her mind and she was surprised to see that it was. Still, this young woman hoping for a career at the museum had no idea what she was looking at and so she promptly brought it to her boss.

He knew immediately what he held in his hands and called everyone he could think of in the administration of the National Museum and he began each conversation with the same words: "*no vas a creer esto!*" At first, not a single person did believe it. But after a few weeks, after all the meetings and the tests and the evaluations, it was concluded that this painting was in fact and in truth exactly what it seemed to be. It was the Renoir that had been stolen from the museum more than three decades earlier.

For reasons not made clear to anyone, the head of the museum chose not to have a press conference and instead directed the staff to simply and quietly put the painting back in its original frame, which was still in the vault, and then mount it in its original position on the wall near the entrance to the Impressionist gallery so that visitors could come in and simply enjoy her without the added pressure of notoriety. And so they did. Including the occasional visit by an admiring gentleman of a certain age who liked to think of her as his donation to the culture of the country.

And in this way, after all that time and all those owners and admirers and dreamers and schemers, all those admiring or craving eyes, a small delicate portrait of a girl with a red bow in her hair found her way back home.

NOTE

This book is a novel, a work of fiction.

All the incidents, characters, and story elements have been invented for the purpose of entertainment.

But the theft at the core of the story is based on a true event.

The heist of sixteen Impressionist paintings from the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in 1980 did occur. Rumors that the secret service was behind the theft have been part of the tale since the beginning, although the motives behind it remain unclear. It is also likely that the paintings were sold to the Chinese government in exchange for arms needed by the Argentinean junta to fight the Falklands War. The notion that oil may have been the original motive is pure speculation but the discovery of oil there is not.

The existence of the unknown Renoir is also fiction but one final story element is true.

After years of negotiations between French authorities, Chinese nationals who claimed to have bought the works legitimately, and the government of Argentina, three of the original works cited in the book were returned to the museum in 2005. The fate of the other works remains unknown.

For more information go to: danavandyne.com