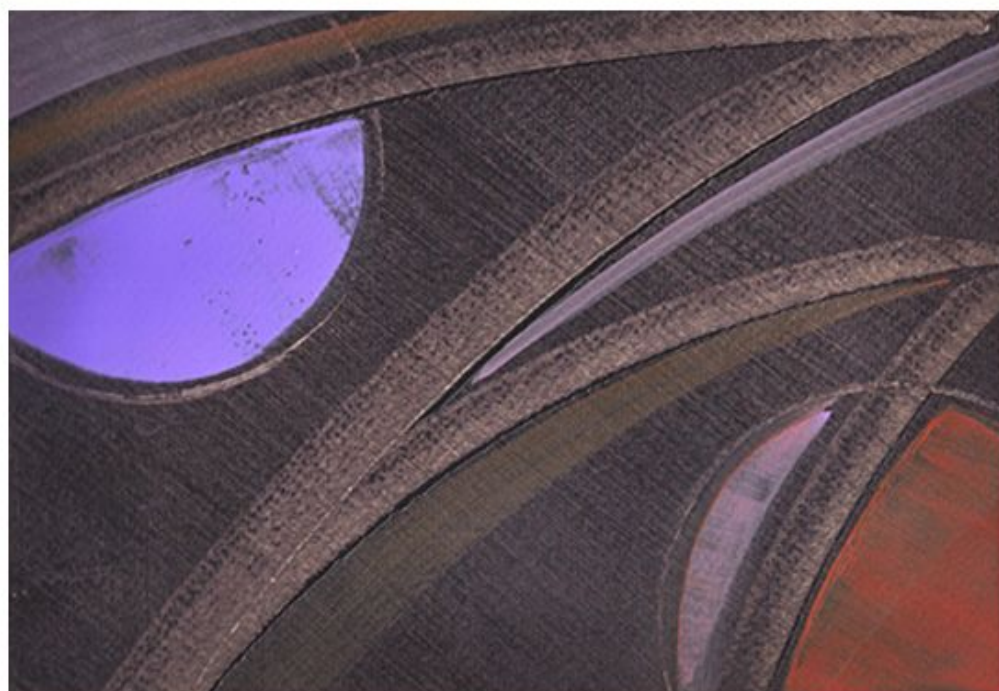


# SPANISH

GARDNER RICH

## TO MY HORSE



# *Spanish to My Horse*

Gardner Rich

a short novel

"I speak Italian to women, French to men, and Spanish to my horse."

– A misquotation of Charles V, attributed to Philip IV

---

Picasso once remarked that he had understood his time and had exploited the greed, vanity, and imbecility of his contemporaries. For those perplexed by the tortured forms of his last portraits of Olga, this late confession has genuine explanatory power. However, some believe the confession is a fake that originated with the CIA during the Cold War, and they question its attribution to Picasso. Skeptics point to Picasso's denial of ever having said it, while perhaps overlooking that the artist was not always a reliable narrator of personal history. Take Picasso's claim that, as a boy, he drew like Raphael; or, that his father surrendered his brushes in deference to little Pablo's prodigious talent. Yet again, there's the fable about Picasso's triumphal entry into the Barcelona Academy – and two or three other stories that may be bull, yet we will never be able to tell. But whether the confession originates with Picasso or with the CIA, one thing seems clear enough: the climate surrounding its provenance is balmy and conducive. Let's begin with that.

For once there were two painters, young, angry and frustrated. "Only two?" you may be asking, because such a coincidence is not extraordinary. Anger and frustration are so widespread among this generation's next-Picassos that the importance of what our pair uniquely share might go undetected in the absence of ultraviolet or underscoring. So, this is the line: our two painters were humiliated. They were not even honorably mentioned. They were merely also-rans. The painter who competed in Italy was rejected at the Verona Biennial, while our other painter was deselected from the Putney's New Talent Exhibition in New York. The reason is not far to seek, given historical roots.

Problems surfaced in the Sixties, when Arthur Danto declared that art had achieved its historical mission. This bit of prescience was announced nearly thirty years before Francis Fukuyama ended history altogether. Also, since the late-70s glut of new-wave-no-wave-new-image stupid art and trash aesthetics, curators on the cutting edge have preferred cross-media alliances of videotape, ephemeral performance, and solipsistic installation made from the detritus of a decaying Western Civilization, with the result that painters have been locked out. Why? Painting is *retardetaire*.

Consider the recent manifesto of the London Stuckists, a round of birdshot fired at the bunkers of the Tate Modern. The manifesto's complaint is that the only individual not in danger of winning the J.W.M. Turner Prize is Mr. Turner, himself – and not because he has been dead these many years. Again, painting is *retardetaire* in this age of mechanical reproduction. Painters nearly never make the Tate's short list. That's the rub. Meanwhile, enclaves of backward artistic practices have appeared in Seattle, Cleveland, and elsewhere, so the London Stuckist's sense of lockout must be widespread indeed.

Outright rejection (worse, indifference) has an aftermath, and devotees of popular psychology will surely recognize the psychic trajectory. Rejected artists pass through a Blue Period of despondency and doubt followed by denial, assessment and reassessment. As this drama plays out, time speeds by while the aperture of this 20<sup>th</sup> century closes ever down on the possibility of being the youngest artist ever collected by the Tate, MOMA,

MOCA, or the Putney. The aspiring rejected, then, need to recover quickly. Six months in mourning is excessive but common, after which an overlooked genius either resurfaces with applications for grants in hand or takes a day job. Usually, it is the latter.

Yet there is another response to official rejection, one that fits a profile drawn by specialized security services that exercise the watchdogs at Interpol. Their profile stresses gamesmanship, alienation, and a childlike impulse to bite someone. Given that great art is sublimation, the consensus among international experts is that *this primal urge to bite may be transformed into a strategy to get even*. [Emphasis supplied] This thought returns us to those things our two painters share in common. After their rejections in Verona and New York, and after their applications for grants were declined, our painters took day jobs and battled deep doubts. And, wonderful to relate, within a few weeks they returned to their easels with a new resolve – but only after one took up Eros yoga, while the other took up Yago rosé, with its pastiche-like postmodern finish. Now, there's a tale to tell about the other, but we will save it for later. Here's what happened with the yoga enthusiast ...

# 1.

Veronica Cardui discovered that no portrait was a work of the Spanish court painter unless its provenance was affirmed by Baron Ranier Maria von Bilderberg, who, though in his dotage, magisterially retained and reserved the last word on Diego Velázquez. Those who were in contact with the old historian and connoisseur knew that his favorable opinion was always accompanied by an involuntary flutter of his clumsily trimmed eyebrows. And it had to be both eyebrows, because the raising of a single brow would cast insurmountable doubt upon any acquisition of any collection – including the august Prado. If the old boy's right brow arched, even *Las Meninas* might be perceived as a pretender to his authoritative list, the catalogue raisonné.

As with a birth certificate, without which we officially cease to exist, so too with old Bilderberg's catalogue raisonné, the definitive description of every painting, drawing, sketch, and doodle of the Spanish master. Every likeness of a dwarf that his facile hand ever rendered had been assigned a Bilderberg number, just as Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A Major is now K 622. Such numbers are indispensable, because they bring order to the vagaries of biography, not to forget their utility for those who protect and preserve history and patrimony. Auction houses also find such numbers useful.

Ms. Cardui saw the usefulness of lists whenever they described lost art, and she noticed that some makers of lists were more thorough than were others. The curators of the Third Reich, for example, could have competed with von Bilderberg. The Reich produced such careful records that even a non-specialist like Veronica might easily research the acquisitions of a master collector like Herman Goering. These lists dovetailed with her interest in biography – not that she was interested in biography as a genre – only that, now and again, she needed some little detail about a particular painter in order to further her work. Beyond that, biographies of artists were among an assortment of personal grievances, according to her diary, in which she wrote: "What's the difference between biography and tabloid journalism?" According to her, these days appreciation of artists turned more upon gossip than upon any intrinsic merit. Pop stars, art stars, faux celebrities and exhibitionists, talk radio, talk television, the whole blighted culture of yak-yak-yak. Or, as the more cultivated among us would have it: tout le bataclan du tralala. Such exasperation, page after page. Here a whine, there a rant, sometimes an incisive

remark as she vented the roiling emotion that soon, when it played out at the Putney Museum, would make all the difference.

Veronica Cardui was not in any way disaffected when she entered the competition at the Putney. She was not a rebel. No artist who enters a competition is a rebel. Not yet, anyway. The young Monet and Renoir and all their friends would likely have become fashionable painters or academicians had they won official honors at the Salon. Instead, they became a clowder of country daubers and a cause *célèbre*, thanks to a near-sighted critic who inadvertently began the longstanding tradition of suggesting slurs for the names of artistic movements. Of course, a slur begins its career as a dismissive characterization. Impressionism. Rather good, isn't it? When that slur was adopted as a *nom de guerre*, the public was confronted with a new movement. Fauvism? Perfect fit. Cubism? Not so good, but it stuck. As to being stuck, there are the pamphleteering Stuckists ... and so it goes, for one hundred years plus change.

Veronica was not a pamphleteer. Nor had she friends with a similar sensibility or aesthetic that might be slurred. No, that was not really it. As much as anything, really, it was a matter of tone. Her difficulties began in questioning a curator, rather too sharply, about the reasons for her rejection. The curator, harried, explained the rejection on two grounds. First, jurors insisted upon the inadequacy of her biographical data. To this Ms Cardui responded that an artist's work should speak for itself, for who knows who made Chartres.

Nothing new in that. But then she added: "Tell me, what resume could Anonymous have submitted? Or Van Gogh, for that matter? And what's biography got to do with it, anyway? So what if Caravaggio killed a man or Klimt had the clap? So what if Vermeer's wife traded his work for bread? So what if Picasso's women ..."

Perhaps her face was too close to the curator's face as she expressed her opinion. Perhaps, on that day, she was not the first to express such an opinion. In any case, the curator was not listening as he coolly and professionally enunciated the second reason for her rejection: Failure to submit an artist's statement. It was this little bit of officiousness and the curator's tone that ignited her incandescent wrath. Veronica waved the exhibition catalogue rolled in her hand. "What," she demanded, "does this nonsense mean?" Not that she was not thinking in terms of nonsense. She was thinking horseshit.

By now, guards were shooting glances one to the other. They made their move as soon as Veronica unfurled the catalogue and thrust it to the curator's face. "Have you read this ... crap? Right here ..." She pointed: "Here it is: '...asserting through traditional plastic means the positive modalities of negative capability.' Huh? A judge's prize for that? Can somebody *please* explain!"

She continued fuming over that year's winner, a painter by the way, as two guards escorted her out a side door. A third guard toted her rejected piece and placed it on the sidewalk against the wall of the Putney, then reentered the building through the heavily closing steel door. EXIT *persona non grata*.

Nevertheless, being *persona non grata* is still a recognizable status that might be parlayed. It might be transformed. Look at *dada*, an anti-art if ever there was one, but *dada* has been studied, absorbed, classified and explicated. That is to say, accommodated. To be accommodated, an outsider must play by unspoken rules requiring that the next step should be to organize a Salon de Refuses, an Armory Show, or an alternative exhibition with a catalogue and commentary. With nothing and no one to organize, Veronica's period of blue doubt was a solo passage. That evening, home from the Putney, she admitted to her diary: "I was ranting. Fortune's standup fool – but what can you do when you live in a

shoe? Pollock pisses in Guggenheim's fireplace and gets the attention of all the right rich people, and that's the luck of the draw – to do the wrong thing at the right time."

She knew the drill.

Art Stars put aluminum foil on studio walls or sleep in cardboard boxes. They drink, they slice, they shoot up. In comparison, Veronica was a seeker en route to Nepal, to meditate at the McDonalds in Kathmandu. She was Merton's rendering of *Chuang Tzu* in a used bookstore along the Avenue of the Americas. She was a private person who stayed in on weekends – the last thing anyone would suspect, seeing her, because she was twenty-five and striking, the sort pursued by day traders in tailored Armani. But Wall Street and its bull and credit default swaps held no interest for her, nor did the assistant professor at Columbia or a lecturer of The New School. She appeared to pay scant attention to the world of appearances, until one noticed the incongruities. She did not line her eyes or pencil her brow, but she did paint her lips in a pale shade and decant cologne from an art deco bottle that she had found while rummaging through Alphabet City. The bottle carried the name of a rival to Coco Chanel, a now-forgotten perfumer who suffered a stud horse biting off her ring finger. When Coco heard the news, she inquired politely whether the animal had suffered any injury. This gossip is the reason Veronica bought the bottle, so her purchase suggests a singular inner life. Curiously, she had read the account in some biography in which she was searching for something else, but also curious because she remembered the story and recognized the bottle. Her memory was quirky this way. And she was a devotee of *Formulas for Painters*. She did not cook pasta, she cooked linseed oil and experimented with recipes for smaltz and lead-tin yellow. All the while wearing an apron, so that there was not so much as a smudge of color on her carefully creased clothes. Lastly, never with pigment around the cuticles or any residual odor of turpentine, her manicured nails were polished clear, so that J.W.M. Turner, examining her hands, would surely have scowled: "You're no artist!"

Veronica seldom conversed with other artists in her building – not, as they tended to assume, because she took exception to green hair, leather jackets, studded tongues, and tattoos. She was shy. She simply had not learned the dialect of the street. When she first moved into the building, she was invited to a party on the floor below. She went down at 7:30 and gravitated to a corner where she eavesdropped upon a literary discussion as the topic moved from the motivations of characters to why writers write. A thoughtful looking man yanked her into the discussion by abruptly asking, "*And*, what do *you* think?" Taken aback, but recovering quickly, Veronica replied that, probably, Cyrano's nose had made him a poet, while a clubfoot had carried Byron to Greece. The conversation came to a halt, and rested there a moment, until the thoughtful man stated that, actually, Byron had sailed to Greece. "Right," she said. Heads nodded, and the group was back on track.

Smiling, the thoughtful man introduced himself to Veronica. "I'm Gavin," he said, "and you're new here." They exchanged pleasantries. He said that he was a conceptual artist, but worked nights as a guard at the Putney. He asked: "Would you care for some wine? White or red?" While he went to get it, she slipped away. There were no more parties after that, and she did not mind.

She kept disciplined hours, practiced Tantric yoga, did her homework and, along the way, encountered those formidable Bilderberg numbers which told her that a painting commissioned by Philip IV went missing two hundred years after Velázquez finished it. According to von Bilderberg, the painting was seized when Napoléon marched into Spain. An inventory recorded it in the briefest of descriptions:

'His Majesty On Horse', oil on linen, 87 by 71; to Marshal Ney.

That was all. What had happened to the painting was anyone's guess, including that of our other frustrated painter, the one rejected in Verona, who, an ocean away, had turned to Yago rosé. Just then, Anthony Morrow was without a bottle, and he was sitting alone. He was no longer in Verona, having fled the Biennale. Immediately after the jurors dismissed his entry, he had decided to 'blow this pop stand' (his words) in favor of Florence and the hills of Tuscany.

For many days he wandered about Florence, looking out from bridges, poking into shops, eating along the sidewalks, ambling through galleries, searching through libraries – and that is how he came to be staring at the same line of text:

'His Majesty On Horse', oil on linen, 87 by 71; to Marshal Ney.

He later explained that he had thought to himself there was no good reason why the painting should remain lost. He thought, too, of the odd title and why it was 'on horse' and not 'on horseback'. Either a French clerk was in a hurry or His Majesty was a junkie, ha-ha.

He pushed his chair away from the reading desk and the catalogue raisonné resting upon it. The handsome volume lay open to an appendix. He ran his finger down the page – nice paper, he thought – for one final check of the dimensions. At 87 by 71 centimeters, the dimensions adhered to a ratio common among portraitists of the Baroque. Not that Morrow really expected to find an altogether serviceable canvas, four hundred years old, leaning against a wall in some out-of-the-way, down-a-narrow-alley collectibles shop.

His mind wandered momentarily, and, reflexively, he turned to the author's bio-data, a lengthy paragraph, more an encomium than a brief biography, and scanned down to its last line.

"Okay ... Herr Professor Doktor's in Basel. Hmm. Guess there are worse places."

He thought, too, of the money saved from a season of painting houses – screw that forevermore. The dwindling account meant that his year of freedom, of starting over, was winding down after only six months. He thought he had been frugal in buying marked-down brushes and fortified varietals. At least his rail pass was still good, so there might be money enough. In a pinch, he told himself, he could max-out credit cards. With a little bit of luck, maybe someone else's credit cards.

For the moment, there was a small but pressing need to collect information. Side to side he glanced and saw no staffers shelving books. Gingerly yet firmly, he pressed down upon the catalogue and tore the end sheets smoothly away from the binding. He placed the sheets inside his sketchbook and the sketchbook inside his backpack, against a copy of *The Horse's Mouth* and the new box of sanguine sticks he had also collected. The lights along the stacks were flickering on. He looked at his watch. Time to head north. Time to do the trick. Impulsive, he had determined his project in a matter of seconds.

He returned to the pensione on the Via Gioberti, packed his bag, picked up the bottles, clothes, and drawings strewn across the floor of his room, took a sponge bath and bounded downstairs to the desk. He paid the bill and collected his passport. From a caddy, he removed a plasticized Eurail map, spread it out and traced a blue line with his finger – Firenze to Bologna to Milano to Chiasso to Lugano to Luzern to Olten to Gross-Basel and the SBB Station on Centralbahnstrasse. From Santa Maria Novella Station, about ten hours. He looked again at his watch.

Fortune smiled. Outside, a cab was drawing up to the curb. Morrow made a dash as its rear door opened and a large handbag attached to an elderly woman got out. He

excused himself, spoke with the driver, and ducked in. On the window glass, a sign in English said *Please Do Not Slam The Door*. He pulled firmly, but it would not close.

"You pull," said the driver. "With the force."

"Hard?"

"What it take."

He pulled the door closed with a slam, the cab pulled away from the curb, and he was off to the station, with its fascist facade of *pietra forte*.

They arrived within minutes. Anthony Morrow was as impressed with Italian modernism on his departure as he had been on his arrival. Only Mussolini could have thrown up such an impersonal building so near the duomo. Skylights over the concourse, without supporting columns, lent a feeling of openness, he had to admit, but this was offset by the plaque near the eighth track, placed in remembrance of the Jews transported from Italy. His mind reeled to the abandoned tennis court in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, vivid in his imagination, as he felt the chimerical regret that Ferrara would have to wait.

He took his seat just as the train lurched forward, and his pulse quickened with gathering speed. Ciao, Firenze. He knew that much Italian.

Morrow breathed night trains. He would meditate on passing lights through dark reflections in windows, come alert at sliding doors, and surreptitiously glimpse half-lit faces or shuffling silhouettes.

It was mesmerizing, watching people, places, and things go by. It was watching a movie or looking at a painting. He was seldom introspective, yet he was aware that he saw the world in this way. A sidewalk in the rain would remind him of Gene Kelly singing and dancing, and also of the umbrellas in *Caillebotte*. A drugstore conjured Hopper. If a woman gazed into a mirror, he saw a Velásquez, Vermeer, or Picasso. He thought of water in terms of Monet and Fellini. Pastries in a case, who else but Thiebaud? An image here would remind him of an image over there. He had, then, a peculiar historical sense, but he had yet to realize that one medium or the other suffused his every thought and perception, in the same way that a law student cannot go strolling in a mall without seeing a tort in every transaction. For the next several hours, with the train clacking rhythmically from station to station, he faded in and out between reverie and dozing.

The sun was a pale disk, and a conductor was yawning, as the train came into the SBB Station. All bustle and scurry, the newsstands, cafes, and restaurants at the station had been open before first light. When Morrow detrained, he passed a rack of the freely distributed *Basler-Stab*, comprised mostly of commercial and classified advertisements. He thought the pages next to last would list rentals, if he could decipher the language.

He jostled up the underground walkway to ground-level parking, looked around and decided to backtrack to a restaurant he had passed along the way, rather like swimming downstream against the current. To avoid the headlong rush, he pushed through the first door available into a small, clean cafe with coats of arms on the wall above a shelf of cups overturned on saucers. Oddly, he did not see a cuckoo clock, even after five hundred years of democracy. He sat on a red stool at a white counter and ordered coffee with a croissant by pointing at one of the small pictures running down the menu like pawns in a file, except that pawns are in ranks. The waitress looked at him and asked: "Do you speak English?"

"Barely," he replied.

She smiled. "Yes, I thought ... maybe."

"How'd you tell?"

"Again, please?"

"How did you know I speak English?"



"You look like an American."

"Really? Is that bad?"

"Not always," she laughed. "And also I like to practice English."

He nodded. "Then maybe you can help me."

"Just a minute, please." She turned to greet an elderly gentleman with blotched skin and thin silver hair who had removed his gray Homburg and placed it on the small table in the corner. Morrow watched him in the mirror behind the counter, as he settled slowly down onto the overstuffed seat. He was surely well past seventy. A nose straight out of Rembrandt hung from eyebrows that might have met in the middle had they not been clumsily trimmed. Under the ceiling light, his squinting eyes were cast in shadow. His mouth turned down wearily at the corners, with deep furrows on either side that suggested long years of opinions to the contrary, while his ears were vestigial in aspect.

Morrow downed the coffee and croissant as though late for an appointment and signaled for the check. When the waitress presented it, she said: "You're going already? Then I can't practice English."

"Sorry 'bout that. Maybe next time, when we both have time. Right now I need to find someplace to stay."

"There's a hostel near the ..." she began, but he interrupted.

"Not a hostel. I need something more permanent."

"Do you mean an apartment?"

"More like a house. I need space." He held up the copy of *Basler-Stab*. "But I can't read German."

"Yes. Well, that newspaper is the right one. But no problem. I think you should go to Hasenburg. I'm sorry, *The Hasenburg*. The French call it 'Chateau Lapin'. Everyone goes there. It's near Marktplatz. Not far. You can walk or take the tram. Number 1 or Number 4. I'm not sure. I always walk."

"Hasenburg near Marktplatz."

"Yes, but don't forget. Some say Chateau Lapin. You will like it. Nothing has changed in forty years, and students go there. You may find luck, because students like to ... how do you say ... they rent to you. When the school is finished. They have a room or a house, and sometimes they are gone two months or maybe three months."

"Sublet."

"Yes. Sublet. I could not think of it."

"Thanks for the tip. Hey, your English is pretty good."

She smiled. "If you are lost, look for a red building. That's Rathaus. You must see it. I mean, you cannot miss it. It's next to Marktplatz."

"Got it ... Rathaus, Marktplatz, the Hasenburg – otherwise known as Chateau Lapin Agile." Catching her blank expression, he added: "Monmartre. The Lapin Agile."

"Yes." She smiled again, looking doubtful.

## 2.

The cost of shipping from Paris was the deciding factor, the reason that Veronica Cardui was approached to copy a small Chagall. Grace, her first-year roommate at Bard College, had discovered Replique Troubetzkoy's genuine hand-painted reproductions while surfing the Internet. Grace felt immediately that she *absolutely must* have the same picture of that violin-playing goat that Julia Roberts gives to Hugh Grant in *Notting Hill*. That Chagall would look *so good* in her new apartment, and then she could *look at it* while playing the soundtrack.

"You have the soundtrack?" Veronica was again talking on the telephone with Grace, who twice earlier had called about the painting. Now and again, she held the phone away from her ear.

Grace was *so* like a soundtrack, it was regrettable. Her absorption of sitcom speech was like *total*. You know, that *rising intonation*? It's like, someone *really could* have a *problem maybe* with that *octave displacement thing*? Veronica did. It grated her ears each time Grace's statements sounded like, you know, *questions*? It was *so* like whining, and Grace was hardly a half-wit in a half-hour sitcom. Why would she do that to herself? It perplexed Veronica, as it perturbed.

"Yup," replied Grace. "I got it, *and* that *tee* shirt his roommate wears, too ... *you* know the one ... the one that says like, *Fancy a Fuck* ..."

"Say what?"

"Oh yeah, *right* – how would *you* know! You haven't *seen it*?"

"Not yet."

"Then we'll have to *do* something about that. You know, like *dinner* ... and a *movie*, here at *my place*? Like tomorrow *night maybe*?" When Veronica hesitated, Grace added, "Come on, you *owe* me. Remember that time you *drug* me to that *thing* ... that *retro* at the *Metro*? It was like *how long* did we stand *in line*? For-*ever*. And *then* we ..."

"All right. I know ... we couldn't see anything."

"Then *you*, who like *really hates* crowds, started in on ..."

"All right, all right. Tomorrow night. But let's make it early."

"You got it! It'll be *great*! I've got zip-locked lasagna from *La Pucinella* and some of their *garlic bread*? We can zap it in the microwave. And we can have some red *wine*? *See*, I didn't forget! *No zinfandel*, I *promise*!"

That was how it started. Veronica was simply doing a good turn for an old friend with whom she chatted occasionally by telephone. In the end, she did not wish to be rude. Besides, she found it easier to paint the picture for *auld lang syne* than to decline for any reason her friend would not understand. She and Grace had begun to speak different languages, or so she described it to herself: "Friends," she wrote, "change quickly once they are out of school and have started down the road to whoever they will be in another five years."

It took Veronica a week to paint the Chagall. Grace was delighted and placed it proudly on the best wall in her apartment, as she said she would do. After admiring it privately for a few days, she decided to share it with a number of friends and two or three well-heeled associates. One of them, after a third glass of zinfandel, began to consider a special order of his own: "Say, Grace, does this friend of yours do Magritte?"

Veronica did not attend the party, owing to feigned cramps. She sent regrets by SMS, and so Grace, although she did not know who was Magritte, was left to answer, "She

*might*." As it happened, she might, she would, and she did, because the commission was rent.

After the Magritte, word passed quickly around this twenty-something crowd who drank double-lattes and parked BMWs by the month. The next few commissions included a Gauguin landscape with seated figures, a pair of Modigliani nudes, and one of the later canvases from Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series. Of course, the hardest to reproduce were Abstract Expressionists, but Veronica felt that if Frankenthaler could reproduce her own work, then she should be able to reproduce it as well.

"I hear the girl is versatile," someone said to Grace, who received ten percent acting as liaison. She soon relayed the compliment, only she inadvertently changed 'versatile' to 'adaptable'.

"Oh, I'm adaptable, all right ... a frog in a pot brought to boil," rejoined Veronica, when she delivered a copy of Monet's footbridge.

Clearly, dark clouds were gathering over the lily pond. The challenge of famous paintings was becoming a bore. The problem Veronica faced was staying awake, for the style and technique might change from commission to commission, but the fundamental approach to the process of copying remained the same, day in and day out. After six months, she began to evaluate her circumstances.

It happened this way. An agent with a heavy German accent approached her to reproduce *A Turkish Bath*, not from a high-resolution photograph, but from the original. A collector wished to display Veronica's copy, while the heavily insured masterpiece by Gerome was sequestered in a vault. In the event she accepted the commission, confidentiality was expected. No one was to be the wiser.

For once, before she could think, Veronica drew the line and was able to say exactly what she meant without becoming flustered. Copies were what they were, she said evenly, and neither she nor her clients to date were pretending otherwise. As soon as she closed the door behind the collector's agent, she saddened, to her own chagrin. She did not feel triumphantly principled, she felt trapped, and she began to second-guess herself for having kissed off a sizeable advance to do a single painting that might have freed her from having to make another batch of modestly priced cookie-cutter copies. So, what was she thinking?

*A Turkish Bath* would have bought her some time. She was always scrambling and always scraping because, although she posed no threat to Replique Troubetzkoy, she had to compete with the firm's reputation and with the prices of practitioners across the river in Hoboken. Scylla and Charybdis. Most angst inducing of all, these commissions that paid the rent were interfering with her real work. They wasted time and drained energy, far more time and energy than doing something of her own. Because copying was soulless, each new order took longer to complete.

As she began to evaluate her circumstances as a copyist, she cast a cold eye on her circumstances in relation to 'the entire system'. Of course, it did not occur to her that, after the Putney, she was beginning to rationalize. Her agitation with galleries, museums, and foundations came to be focused on the preparation of 35mm slides, emblematic time wasters that also interfered with her work. Cover letters and references aside, color slides of recent work were the means of communication whenever and wherever she sent an application.

Slides, slides, slides. She saw it as a numbers game. Sometimes the magic number was ten, sometimes it was twenty-five, together with special instructions: "Each slide must show the name of the artist, the title, the dimensions, the medium, the date, and have a red

dot in the upper left corner to indicate the top." That is, unless the dot was to be placed in the upper right or the word "Top" was to be written at the top. In any case, she had to prepare another set of slides that was returned months later, and so they could not be used again because the work was no longer recent.

Slides, slides, slides. If a grant was the only exit from competition with Replique Troubetzkoy, the never-ending process of preparing slides to send to galleries, museums, and foundations became grindingly necessary. It was that or flipping burgers on the night shift at McDonald's in Kathmandu.

Now the truth is that Veronica Cardui had only prepared two sets of slides, total, to send to two different foundations. But she projected the effort and expense into the future, that's all. As her agitation turned to desperation, she began to form the inchoate thought that it might be efficient to do "one big one." But the thought remained partitioned in her brain, even as she sensed that the information she kept gathering might be leading somewhere.

She gave way to inertia. Surely things must have been different in the world of art, once upon a time. She recalled that Lee Krasner once remarked there were many days when she and Pollock had to decide whether to buy paint or cigarettes, because they did not have money for both. In her journal, Veronica noted that Ms. Krasner had said nothing about 35mm slides. This is how she spent the weekend.

Then, on Monday morning, to begin a week of changes she had set for herself, she wrote a letter. Finished venting, she looked out the window to the street below – honking horns in another traffic jam, which suited her mood. She returned to the letter, folded it into an envelope addressed to that snooty curator at the Putney, standing astride, arms folded. She had visualized him every day since collecting her rejected painting. That is, since being pulled out the door.

On this particular Monday, perhaps in lieu of an artist's statement, she had decided to explain herself, as clearly as she was able, to him. She remembered his face and his nametag, and he had come to represent everything she felt herself up against. With the letter sealed, her fuming subsided. Such is the benefit of being proactive, however late. She might have felt no relief at all, had she known that the letter could be admissible evidence, thanks to an unfortunate choice of words in passing: since the rejection, she could not paint her own stuff and was sick of "knocking off masterpieces."

She sponge-bathed, dressed, and went downstairs. On the street, particulate matter notwithstanding, the air was invigorating. She walked to a branch of the post office, stood in line for stamps, and dropped the letter in the slot. She decided to spend the morning at the public library, pursuing her interest in the palettes of old masters. In the afternoon, she ate lunch on the sidewalk, browsed in a bookshop where she purchased a postcard of Yves Klein launching himself over a Paris street, and went window-shopping. It was the first pleasant day in many days. When she returned home in the evening, she disconnected the phone. She did yoga, took a real bath, and made a salad. She washed the dishes. She drank mulberry tea, rinsed the cup, and went to bed. She turned on the low lamp atop her makeshift nightstand, where waited *Formulas for Painters* and a life of Eric Hebborn, the English forger attacked in Rome three years earlier, on Elvis Presley's birthday. Hammer to the head, according to pathologists. For bedtime, she preferred biography.

## 3.

As advertised, Chateau Lapin was an old pub with cult status and traditional fare. In its bustling kitchen, lowly spuds rose to the dignity of a renowned dish called Röstli.

At a table against the wall, sitting under an imposing rack of antlers, a fastidious looking man heard Anthony Morrow order in English and he recognized Morrow's nasal twang. He was an ex-patriate American, this fastidious man, and, gingerly, he tied the strings securing a black portfolio. He saw that the portfolio had caught Morrow's eye, so he addressed him directly.

"Hello." The man nodded in a vaguely formal manner. "Where are you from?"

From the start, Morrow found the man's attenuated speech off-putting, and he did not wish to engage in conversation. His response had the distance of an echo. "Boulder, Colorado."

"I know Boulder. Have you been here long?"

"Basel? No. Just arrived. Been in Italy."

"Ah, Italy." The man extended his hand. "My name is Alex."

"Anthony," Morrow replied and shook hands off-handedly. "You live here?"

"Yes. Three years now. I work up on the hill, as a research assistant."

"On the hill?"

"At the university."

Morrow's ears perked. "Just the man I want to meet."

"Really. How so?"

A waitress brought rösti piping hot from a microwave. She placed it in front of Morrow with one hand and set out silverware with the other.

"You ordered dark beer, too, yes?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"Excuse me, Greta," said the research assistant to the waitress. "Could you bring one for me, too?"

"Ueli?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Shooer," she laughed. "With this one, it's always 'shooer'."

The research assistant turned back to Morrow. "I love this place. They say nothing has changed in forty years, including the waitresses."

"You want to drink your beer or wear it?" retorted the waitress, swiping the air over his head as she passed.

"Nice, friendly atmosphere, too."

"Not bad," said Morrow, taking a bite of rösti.

The research assistant nodded. "I assume the potatoes aren't forty years old. By the way, that's Greta."

"I gathered."

"She just graduated in English Lit."

"Yeah? Why's she here?"

"Well, I suppose literature is dead. I mean, what can you do with it? Jobs are scarce. Even a native speaker would have trouble finding anything else to do with only a degree in English Lit."

"Yeah, the economy sucks."

"It's not so bad here, compared with other places. Take Walloon, or the former East Germany. But Basel's doing all right."

"Seems pretty laid back."

"Yes, for the most part – but there are many foreigners here. They take jobs, so there's tension in the air – mostly problems with Albanians who won't do as the Romans do, that sort of thing. Locals complain about abuses of social services. But I don't think it's always to do with Albanians, per se."

"Foreigners generally?"

"Well, I know a woman who has a lifetime disability because one of her legs is shorter than the other. Can't be by much, because she teaches high-impact aerobics three nights per week. Isn't that something? So, the monthly checks keep coming, and last year she vacationed two weeks on Ibiza."

"Ibiza? You gotta be kidding."

"Am I?"

"So what are you saying – she's a foreigner?"

"Not at all. Born and bred in Gross-Basel." He laughed. "I don't know. She's not hanging out all day, or sleeping with ten others in a single bedroom, or spraying graffiti, so she may not be a very good example of a societal ill. From a certain perspective, that is. I'm talking about the perceptions of the locals."

"Yeah well, it's always about money, isn't it."

"What is?"

"Everything."

Greta brought beer. She came and went, relaying hurried instructions to a slow busboy as tables began piling up.

"Maybe," continued the research assistant. "Maybe just too many rats in the box. Something's in the air. You know, with everyone worried about Y2K, the extreme right resurgent, evangelicals awaiting the rapture while bombing abortion clinics. Not to forget globalization, cabals of Masons and plots of synarchists ..."

"Cabals of kabbalists?" Morrow interrupted with a snort. He was looking at the hieroglyphs on the Ueli Bier label.

"... Monica Lewinsky and Bill's willie," continued the assistant.

"Come again?"

"British for the president's gold-prick-in-waiting."

Morrow waved him off. "Aw, right."

The assistant nodded. "So, you said that I'm just the man you want to meet?"

Morrow faced him directly. "Yeah." He surveyed the assistant's interlocked fingers and guarded expression. "Alex, right? From the university?"

The assistant nodded. "And you are Anthony."

"Tony," said Morrow, sipping beer. "Well, Alex, here's the thing. I need to find a place to stay for a while. You know, sublet or something. You know of anything?"

The assistant sized him up. "To stay for how long?"

"A month or two, maybe longer. And I need north light."

"Why north light?"

"I paint."

"Ah." The research assistant laid his palms flat atop the black portfolio. He looked puzzled. His fingers drummed a crisp paradiddle. "Then you're not just here for the Fair."

Morrow had forgot Art Basel and needed to cover his backside quickly. "No, not just the Fair. Actually, I'm on a Fulbright." He shrugged, as if to shrug it off.

"Fulbright, huh? Well, you picked a good year. It's Art Basel's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Rauschenberg's in town. Daniel Buren. Vanessa Beecroft. At least they're expected to come. Dealers from everywhere are here, setting up booths over at the Messe Basel.

That's the exhibition hall. It opens officially in a couple days." At that, the research assistant smiled. "Of course, some manage to get in early."

"Yeah, who?"

"Sotheby's Names, for starters. You know, rich collectors. They know a dealer who lends them a worker's pass and tells them to dress down. Or, to carry a clipboard and look pressed for time. Sure. Instant authorization, like wearing a lab coat at Roche or Novartis. You can slip right past security. I did it last year."

Morrow shrugged again. "Guess I don't know much about authorization."

"Now you do." The assistant was not sure what to think, so he hazarded: "Well, that's interesting. You're an itinerant artist, up from Italy, with a Fulbright Scholarship."

It didn't sound quite right to Morrow's ears, either, and he knew it was best to keep as close to the truth as possible: "I'm studying portraiture – Italian, Spanish and Dutch ..."

The research assistant smiled again. "It's good you have the scholarship."

"Why's that?"

"Because these days artists on their own have work permits and pay taxes – unless they want to be taken for workers from Albania."

"You're saying, without a Fulbright, I would need a work permit to paint?"

"Sure, you're a foreigner. And for you, painting is not a hobby. Itinerant painters and other immigrants have work permits."

"Lucky I'm a student."

Alex nodded knowingly. "Not to be paranoid, but they do watch. For all you know, someone could be an informant for the immigration police. Myself, for example."

Morrow assessed him coolly. Right, a jokester or a player.

"I'm kidding, of course," assured the research assistant. "I wouldn't worry about it, however long you're here. Just keep quiet and try to look as if you have a trust fund or a numbered account."

"Works for me," said Morrow.

The research assistant suggested that Morrow come to see a house close by the Hasenburg-Chateau Lapin. It was a warm day, and the sky was clear. A breeze carried the oily fish-smell off the Rhein. In the distance, he heard honking horns, horns Morrow incorrectly supposed came from those brightly painted ferries that crossed between Gross-Basel and Klein-Basel with the periodicity of a pendulum.

They walked and talked, with Alex playing the guide. "Observe," he said, with a sweeping gesture, "the absence of cars. All of it, from Chateau Lapin over to Marktplatz, on down to Barfuserplatz, all of it is reserved to pedestrians. Quite a nice idea, you must concede – like your Pearl Street Mall in Boulder."

Morrow took the needling in stride. Maybe, he thought, the dude doesn't get out much. Too little opportunity to impress the tourists with 'the Rathaus is over here, and the Münster is over there'.

Alex continued: "A little farther up is the Mittiere Bridge. It runs straight into Claraplatz, where one finds restaurants and bars with varied fare. And we do mean the whole nine yards, from international cuisine to working girls out of Africa, Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe."

"What, a war zone?"

"Meaning?"

"A legalized district."

"No," the assistant shook his head. "I shouldn't think so."

"No meister-plan, huh?"

"Exactly. No master plan. Pure laissez faire."

Within a few minutes, the scenery turned residential and Alex fell quiet. They went up a short street and rounded a corner. Two doors down, he trumpeted: "Ta-daa."

They were arrived.

The house looked soberly Calvinist. It was sequestered in a narrow cobblestone lane between Spalenberg and Rosshofgasse. The lane was unmarked. Alex said its name: Mühletorgässlein. Morrow tried to repeat, but the word stuck in his throat. The assistant snorted good-naturedly. "Practice," he said, "practice. You'll get it."

The research assistant produced an oddly shaped key, opened the tall front door with its bold rose pattern on frosted glass, and stepped into the foyer. He suggested that a spacious attic on the third floor, with its high timbered ceiling and panoramic view, would make a habitable studio. He himself stayed on the second floor. And by the way, he added, the stairs down to the foyer permitted a level of privacy. Certainly the owner, a retired professor, would be no bother. The old scholar had not been upstairs to the second floor for a very long time, much less to the attic. In fact, the professor's arthritic knees were the reason for the assistant living in the suite off the library. It was his responsibility to facilitate the professor's researches at home, while acting as liaison with the university.

Alex gestured toward the stair. As they made their ascent, the heavily varnished steps creaked softly underfoot.

"He's practically deaf, the professor, and wouldn't know you're upstairs, should anyone fail to tell him."

At the top, with difficulty Alex pushed open the attic door along an arc scored on the wooden floor.

"Rent is the cheapest in the city, I assure you, and, as you have seen, the location is convenient."

Morrow glanced about the attic, at the cool walls and the diffuse light from the double windows once the shutters were opened wide. The room was bare save for a cot, two chairs and a small table. All to the good, he thought.

"So, what do you think?" asked Alex.

"No boxes? Aren't attics for storage?"

"Some are, no doubt," replied the assistant. "But someone stayed here not long ago, and the house has a basement."

Morrow changed the subject abruptly. "You spend much time in your capacity as liaison?" he asked the assistant.

"There's a weekly meeting I attend. A few errands from time to time. Nothing too strenuous or demanding, believe me."

"Then you're not a student here."

"No. Just doing research."

"So maybe you know von Bilderberg, the art historian, right?"

The fastidious research assistant frowned at the odd question. "Yes, I suppose I do. You will like the old boy. Dr. Bilderberg may be a little quirky, but he's not cranky."

"What, you'll introduce me?"

The assistant chuckled. "Oh, I see. How funny! You don't know? I thought I'd mentioned it. Well, I apologize for the ... the oversight, but this is his house."

Morrow was nonplussed. "Bilderberg's house. Yeah, okay." He held up the folded *Basler-Stab*. "Guess I don't need this?"

"That's up to you. Stay here while you get your bearings, and maybe we can come to some arrangement by the end of the week. How does that sound? See if you like the



place before you go to the trouble of setting up a studio and all that. Besides, Professor B likes to assist scholars. I came here on a Fulbright, myself, you know."

"So you like it here?"

Alex did not answer all at once. He thought about it, then said: "Whatever the case, I'm still here."

## 4.

At a Goodwill Store in Alphabet City, Veronica was feigning preoccupation. It was difficult not to notice the dark-haired woman, perhaps thirty, who was scrutinizing a feathered hat yanked from a haphazard pile on a folding table. Yes, it was difficult not to notice. She was talking to herself in French. Even the heavy clerk seated on a low stool behind the counter was rustling a newspaper to show she was not really listening. Nothing new in that stratagem. It provided cover for watchful eyes or expressed annoyance as the needs arose, which was daily, because the store got all kinds. And why not, because Alphabet City got all kinds. The residents were loyal, even proud of their neighborhood, but none would deny that this one-time red light district was a cracked bowl of moldy salad in the midst of Manhattan's fish and meat courses. Avenues A, B, C, D, not far from the financial district, abutted self-conscious SoHo, while Alphabet City's northern line was either 14<sup>th</sup> Street or 23<sup>rd</sup>, depending on how one viewed Avenue C's historical role.

Over on White Street, the *fin de siecle* had burned itself out in The Mudd Club a generation too soon. Now, the dusty confines of the Goodwill felt like the end of analog time, the prevailing wind blew from bullish Wall Street, and change was in the air. The writing, figurative or sprayed, was on the wall.

Avenue D-for-'dangerous', with its low-income housing, was still mostly affordable – but anxious owners of small businesses, and not a few families, could no longer afford the renovated apartments and upscale restaurants of Avenue C. Good-bye, gardens in vacant lots; ciao, Charas Community Center; adios, artists and musicians. Gentrification, that bane of struggling families, self-styled bohemians, and vodka-soaked bums, was marching across Houston Street and through the neighborhood on its way to the Bowery. In this Ruckus Manhattan, City Hall was pushing redevelopment of the waterfront along East River Park. Meanwhile, in U2's *Alphaville*, De Niro and Hoffman were learning their lines for *Flawless*, so the atmosphere was tangibly disjunctive, a mismatch of landmarks like Tompkins Square and the Stuyvesant Town residential community – private, middle class, and mostly white.

Shopping at the Goodwill was no longer fashionable. Madonna, Lauper and Harry had come and gone. Veronica did not expect to meet a celebrity, although a sale at the Goodwill was an occasion. Once, she found an immaculate pair of pumps covered in ostrich skin, but they were too small. Another time, she found her treasured art deco perfume bottle. Usually, she looked at coats and scarves and earrings, and she imagined the lives of people who had made the donations or simply left them behind. Little did she know that soon she would be imagining the life of the woman still muttering in French.

"Yes, this might do," the woman said in English, running her hand along the length of a peacock feather. "How beautifully iridescent. If only ..." Her voice trailed off.

Veronica glanced over at the clerk, now working a crossword puzzle, then focused her attention on the rack of dress coats. Aloof preoccupation was her preferred method for avoiding direct confrontations with muttering crackpots when standing on a corner, waiting for the light to change. She would have done better, perhaps turned the tables, by asking the crackpot for a fiver.

"I can't seem to decide," said the woman to her directly. "Which would you prefer? Do you mind my asking?"

"Me? Not at all," said Veronica uncertainly, as she noticed the clerk look warily up from the crossword puzzle and tamp a stubby pencil upon the counter, thump-tap-tap.

A warning signal?

The dark-haired woman, who looked vaguely like Warhol's *Ten Lizzs*, held up two hats. One was a pillbox affair with the iridescent pheasant feather, the other was a conch-shape hidden in an ostrich plume.

Veronica wanted to sound rational. "Sounds as if there's an occasion?"

"Oh, there's most definitely an occasion," said the woman.

"I never wear hats. I'm not sure how much help ..."

"No, not the hat. The feather, but which one? It's for the masked ball."

"Really." Veronica again glanced at the clerk, who returned to the crossword. In Alphabet City, everyone but a hooker avoids glances.

"Yes. On the Saturday." The woman sounded wistful.

Carefully, Veronica said: "Sounds like a real affair."

"Yes, of course, but not nearly so lavish as in grandmother's day ... so-called Great Depression. I think masked balls are magical, don't you?"

"Sorry. Never been to one." Veronica was now pushing hangers determinedly to one side, as if to say 'I'm busy. No, not this one or this one'.

"Well, that's easily remedied," the woman continued. "An invitation is not so difficult to come by ... but a suitable costume ..." She sighed. Then she embarked on a rambling monologue about designers and eveningwear.

Clothing was so minimal now, nothing but glitz, nothing to rival the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, no hats, gloves, stoles or capes anymore because of the endangered species lists, and now everything is on it, because we've depleted the planet, worn it down, worn it out – still, if only she'd had this or that for last week's shoot, and isn't that mess in Yugoslavia simply horrific – one can't imagine ... but we're more concerned with Y2K compliance, aren't we, because ... "What with everything that's happening in our little world. You can't already have forgot the bombing in Yugoslavia?"

She had stopped rambling. When Veronica failed to respond, the woman added: "And now there's a lawsuit at The Hague, charging the Clinton Administration with war crimes. Other leaders, too. Aren't you following it?"

"I guess not," Veronica replied defensively. "Too busy doing what I do."

"And what is it that you do?"

"Me? Paint."

"And what do you paint?"

"Commissions, mostly."

"Ah, a real artist, then. Let me give you my card." *Ten Lizzs* reached for a purse that was buried under some hats on the folding table. The clasp opened with a crisp click. From an inside pocket, she withdrew a card printed in starkest black on white:

*Anna Lorraine Noailles*  
*Photography*

No telephone, no fax, no e-mail address, but the unidentifiable typeface was as clean as Helvetica.

Veronica did not give her name in return. "You're a photographer," she said.

"Of the famous and the soon-to-be ... So, perhaps one day you will sit for me."

"One day perhaps," said Veronica politely.

"Excellent." Momentarily lost in thought, the woman's face became abstracted. When at length she spoke again, she seemed to be speaking directly to no one: "Come along, as my guest. To the masked ball, I mean. You might meet one or two interesting

people, and I could use a little company. It's a nice drive to Glen Cove, but it goes by faster with company. So why not?"

Then the woman focused upon Veronica, who hesitated: "It sounds ... It's kind of you to offer, but I couldn't ..."

"Never mind then. It was just a thought. I apologize. One shouldn't be so forward. I confess, I'm a bit impulsive that way."

The apology trumped Veronica's polite effort to extricate her self. Worse, it was a tacit plea for sympathy – always the heel not dipped in the Styx – an obligation to return some semblance of human kindness.

"No problem ... it's just that I have a ... a previous engagement," she lied. Small fabrications were harder, and she was less than adroit with the big ones. To lie well, one must convince oneself first.

"I quite understand," smiled *Ten Lizz*. "But tell me, which feather do you prefer?"

Veronica feigned interest. Again, the clerk was looking up. "Well, I suppose the ostrich feather." The clerk looked down.

"Of course, the ostrich feather." The woman laughed like tingling Sarna bells.

"Are we agreed? Cyrano would say it has *panache*."

"*Mon panache*." The response was automatic. Veronica heard herself say Cyrano's last line. In that moment, the strange woman holding the ridiculous hats became someone nearly familiar, someone from that sorority whose members recognize each other through allusive remarks, whether made in the Goodwill or Bergdorf-Goodman's. One time or other, birds of this particular feather will remark Cyrano's nose, whether at a party or while standing on a corner, waiting for the light to change.

"I think you are crazy," said *Ten Lizz*. "Do you know?"

They exchanged smiles.

"I must go," said Veronica. "It's been nice chatting with you."

"Yes, of course. Do you have a card? I would like to see your work sometime.

You said you are a painter, yes?"

"Yes, a painter."

"Then I must visit your studio ..."

"Can't right now. I work in my apartment."

"Here in Alphabet City?"

"No, my apartment's on the West Side."

"Oh, really! Look, I'm going through Midtown. I could send you." She reached into her purse to pull out a mobile phone. "Just give me a minute ..." She pushed buttons impatiently, spoke rapidly in French, then returned the phone to her purse. "Yes, I can send you. It's no problem at all, and you can show me your work." She pointed to the window onto the street. A long car was pulling up. The clerk looked up and squinted into the light. It was a Bentley Arnage E38, all five meters of it.

"Voilà, as easy as one, two, three," the woman said. "So, it's decided."

To the clerk, the woman said: "I'll have this, please." She presented the hat with the ostrich feather, along with a crisp banknote.

What to do. Veronica was more indecisive than usual.

The clerk made change and put the hat in a bag from A&P. "Come again."

"Come on! Let's scoot," said the woman. "You will show me your work, if it's not inconvenient?"

Her protest was silly, and she knew it. "There isn't much to see ... it's ..."

"In progress? But I like that best."

"It's just a commission."

"Oh, that's right. You do commissions, and commissions have no soul. Is that what you mean?" *Ten Liza* was enjoying herself. "You're embarrassed, I hope."

"Well ..."

"Well what?"

What the hell. Veronica decided to go with the flow. "I don't know if it's worth the effort ... climbing the stairs to my apartment – but, I can show you something. If you like."

"I like. So, let's go then," said the woman, pushing through the door.

A driver in uniform was waiting beside the limousine, holding open the dark door of opportunity to expose the long, low leather seat within. On the floor was a short stack of folders and what appeared to be a PDF printout. As Veronica slid across the leather, she glanced at the title: "Measuring inflation: an attempt to operationalize Carl Menger's concept of the inner value of money." When *Ten Liza* settled in, she rested a well-heeled foot upon a folder from Netherlands Bank, discretely embossed in blue and gold.

"Interest in art is something of a tradition in my family," she said. "The vicomtesse supported many artists."

"Who?" Veronica asked, meaning the artists.

"Mémère, my grandmother. She, especially, was a longtime patron and participant. She knew everyone. Salvador Dalí painted her – and Charles, too, of course."

Charles, too, painted the grandmother? Or did Dalí paint the two of them at once or separately? It was disjointed and hard to follow. Veronica nodded attentively and tried to piece the story together. She had never studied the surrealists in depth, so she knew little of Dalí, only that he painted melting watches and flaming giraffes and had been influenced somehow by the incomparable Velásquez, whom she was studying closely.

"Painted by Dalí?" she said in feigned amazement.

"Oh, yes," said *Ten Liza*, matter of factly. "I think you know about Mémère's support of the surrealist group – especially their films – Luis Buñuel." She warmed to her subject. "There are so many stories. Have you seen *Les Mystères du château du Dé*? Man Ray's film. 1929, the same year Dalí had his Paris show and Charles bought, what, *The Lugubrious Game*, it's called. Oh, and Dalí's father! Was he livid! Imagine having a self-styled genius for a son, one who says that he enjoys spitting on a portrait of his dead mother! That was the reason, not Éluard's wife. Everyone thinks Dalí's father disapproved of Gala and so Dalí shaved his head ... ooh, la-la! No, that is not the real reason he was banished from his family. Not at all. And later Dalí was banished from the surrealists, too. Excommunicated. They held a trial, you know. Yes, that's right. The portrait of Mémère and Charles was painted sometime after *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Âge d'Or*."

A door to some mental storage unit was being tried and tested.

"Man Ray filmed *Les Mystères* at Charles and Mémère's villa in Hyeres."

Something jimmied the lock. Veronica did know something of what she was hearing, only she had forgot or misplaced names and titles. To her genuine amazement, she realized that she was riding serenely along the Avenue of the Americas with someone who gave every indication of being the granddaughter of the Vicomtesse Marie-Laure de Noailles. Who was married to Vicomte Charles de Noailles, so something seemed odd. If Marie-Laure was Mémère, why was Charles called Charles?

"He had a talent for annoying people, this Avida Dollars. Ha! Good, isn't it? Breton's anagram for Salvador Dalí, apropos of his commercials for perfume and chocolate bars! Not to forget his upscale designer baubles. Dalí became a brand name. Still, I like his painting of Mémère and Charles, although I like the portrait by Luis Fernandez better.

What I do not like is that portrait Balthus painted, the one with Mémère slouching in a chair. But then, Count de Rola was always painting slouchers, wasn't he."

Then there was the Count de Beaumont, also seen bouncing around in Man Ray's film. He was the Governor of Cochine-China, Commander of the Légion d'honneur, a member of the Jockey Club ... and so on. Veronica was at once fascinated and out-to-sea. The talk continued in this vein for half an hour, through slow traffic and up the stairs to the apartment. Veronica expressed embarrassment that her building had no elevator, but *Ten Lizz*, who was at last fixed in her mind as Anna Lorraine Noailles, scoffed and called her bourgeois. "Visiting studios is like going on safari," she said. "You must be prepared to rough it a little."

According to the diary, it was the first of many visits that Noailles would pay to Veronica's apartment. On this first visit, she stayed but a few minutes, long enough to see the reproduction in progress and another painting that Veronica identified as her real work – and just long enough to offer a commission. Veronica was to paint her portrait in the manner of Luis Fernandez, whose portrait of Mémère she so much admired. In the evening on Saturday, she was to accompany Ms. Noailles to the masked ball.

After Anna Lorraine's departure, Veronica sat looking out the window, gathering her thoughts. What did she know of haute bohemia, the alchemical marriage of aristocrats and revolutionaries? Something told her to find out. A refresher course was needed. She would start tomorrow, at the library, at the beginning.

When evening came, she went down to a rental shop around the corner, in the hope of finding a copy of *Un Chien Andalou*. Her luck held. She returned to her apartment with a sonORIZED version featuring a soundtrack performed by the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Basel.

## 5.

Basel will always be wasted on an Anthony Morrow. He merely glanced at his Lonely Planet Guide, coming away with less than a clue in respect of the city's 'long procession of the centuries', that march of Celts in animal skins, followed by Romans in breastplates, followed by international bankers in three-piece suits. It was lost on him that time is tangible in Basel, so much so that some have felt the town's history as an oppressive weight. He did not know, for example, that Jung had fled Basel for 'the freer air of Zurich', the paradoxical home of predestination and the Café Voltaire. Still, if freer air is the measure, apologists may fairly recall that Basel played host to the First, Second, and Third International Zionist Conventions during the height of the Dreyfus scandal. It is home to the basilisk and the Johanniter Brücke, to devotees and to watchdogs of the Illuminati. In Basel, it is not possible to suspend the suspicion that time is susceptible to rends in its fabric, that it might be 1999 and the 19<sup>th</sup> century at once in the same moment, so that Nietzsche could still be searching stacks in the University library. Granted, the faculty no longer sought the philosopher's stone, but there remained an aura of alchemy. Something wafting the air. The University of Basel, where the ascetic humanist Erasmus taught, was founded in 1459 by a charter of the humanist Pope Pius II, the same poet and *bon vivant* who years earlier at the Council of Basel helped to elect the Anti-Pope Felix V; and who, during an ill-conceived crusade against the Turks, died in 1464 – but not before quashing by Bull those reforms urged in the conciliar movement. Such is local color that unshakable romantics still expect the university to have a scriptorium of rough wooden benches, with an alcove in which stands a writing desk scratched with Paracelsus's colophon. But when Morrow pressed his nose against a windowpane, he saw steel bookshelves, Bauhaus-inspired reading lamps, tables faced in Formica, and signs in Helvetica. Cool, clean, and utterly utilitarian.

He had gone there directly, to the library. The university was, is, up the hill from the house on Mühletorgässlein. Sleeping little on his first night in the attic room, Morrow had risen early. He wanted to get his bearings, so he made a quick study of the map in his Lonely Planet Guide. From that he knew approximately that Mühletorgässlein was off Rosshofgasse, which is between Spalenberg, Petersgraben and Nadelberg, and he further determined that this first full day should be spent in exploration. He was out the door and wandering around well before the rush of students scurrying to eight o'clock classes. And he had already pressed his nose against the window of the library when the campus began to bustle, which is when he decided to move on, to explore elsewhere.

He walked briskly. Along Petersgraben he saw posters announcing the 30-Year Celebration of ART BASEL. According to newspapers he could not read, organizers were expecting some 250 dealers from around the world. There would be masterworks by Picasso, Johns and Richter, as well as work by hundreds of others like Rosemarie Trockel, who represented Germany in the Venice Biennale, and whom Morrow would have found viscerally annoying had he known. At a kiosk he read an alphabetical list in English of anticipated guests that included Vanessa Beecroft, Daniel Buren, Rebecca Horn, and Robert Rauschenberg. These dignitaries were expected at the official Fair. A Plexiglas caddy was stuffed with hand-lettered brochures produced by roneograph, in German, French and English, that promoted an alternative fair. Morrow copped one and read that this year's event would emphasize social change, with exhibitions being divided into hubs concerned with specific issues: immigration, fashion, commodification, and contemporary malaise. Also, there would be drawings of gay sex in a sonic landscape synchronized with videos of black helicopters at night.

He passed the Lachenmeier Kunstmaler Supply off Leonhardsgraben, not yet open. Alex had mentioned that every artist's material imaginable could be found therein. Nearby the Supply was Chez Prunella, a studiously scruffy cafe that catered to Basel's bourgeois bohemians, the ubiquitous *bobos*, who drift in to sip pastis, the working-class staple. As an expression of solidarity, times being what they are, Morrow stopped and ordered 'latte to go'. While standing and waiting, he overheard a conversation at a nearby table. Conspicuous behind designer sunglasses, a man with a videocamera was assessing passersby. The man leaned across the table to his backpacking companion and said: "I'm not one, but some of my friends are *bobos*, and they know their time is up." Morrow paid for coffee and glanced at the cameraman's smug shades. He made a mental note about *bobos*, whatever they were.

He sipped and walked and looked. He did not know that street after street was regulated by the Heimatschutz, a municipal arm extending to the preservation of houses that have not changed in appearance since the fourteenth century. Nor was he cognizant that, within Basel's ubiquitous three-floor manses (as it happens the homes of the ubiquitous *bobos*), one would find air conditioners, microwaves, computers and cable televisions, and little if any modern plumbing connected to the lead pipes laid by the Romans. Morrow saw only the facades and thought that, unless Hotel Boulderado is an historical site, there was nothing back home remotely like Basel.

He was a curious creature, this Mr. Morrow, one of the self-taught who manage to graduate from university – an undisciplined polymath with no math or foreign language. He read art history, natural history, alternative history, and piles of biography. And he read Spengler and Heyerdahl and Van Daniken and Gould and Hawking. He had curious areas of specialization that altogether accounted for a personal Out of Africa Theory. He knew about Picasso's absorption with and assimilation of African masks, about Sir Richard Burton's adventures and the source of the Nile, about Rimbaud smuggling guns, about the photographer Mirella Ricciardi's dialogue in *L'eclisse* and the aftermath of colonialism, about Nelson Mandela and the AFC, the Bantu and the Ashanti, and he could recite the binomials for native birds. But his knowledge had divers curious gaps. He had never heard of Burkina Faso, for example, and he thought the Seychelles were in the Caribbean. This capacious grasp of one continent's history and culture is the same slippery hold that Morrow had upon Europe, Asia, and North and South America. Without reservation, the world was his oi!-ster.

He continued along Leonhardsgraben, sipping latte and observing the passing scene, accompanied by his fancies, past the Musik Akademie and Kirche Platz, where Leonhardsgraben becomes Kohlenberg. He stopped in a pocket park to look at a public map and was seized immediately by the Johanniter Brücke. John's Knights' Bridge. Of course, he thought, why hadn't he noticed it before? The Knights of St. John's Hospital, the military order that supplanted and absorbed the Templars who had fled not only to Scotland and Portugal but also to Switzerland, where they were alchemically transmuted into the Gnomes of Zurich who control the world's banking system and financial markets. As easy as 1,2,3, in and out of a fanciful flight in a matter of seconds. His wheels having touched down, he focused on the map. Kohlenberg turned into Steinenberg that became St. Alban Graben where was the Kunstmuseum – more or less straight ahead. But the art museum was not his objective. No, because the roneographed brochure he copped at the kiosk had had a funky advertisement that caused a sensation of *déjà vu* and triggered an intuition. He was certain it must be the same shop in the same ad, one that he remembered from a trade magazine thumbed through many days ago – days before he perused von Bilderberg's catalogue and decided to entrain to Basel. He recognized it, like a nomad



apprehends a portent in the vaulted dome of heaven, and he followed it, crossing the Wettsteinbrücke. The bridge felt airy and bracing. Below, with bells clanging and horns honking, faster boats passed stolid transports powered by the river itself. A ferry on a cable steered with a rudder. It reminded Morrow of a gondola, and he tried to identify it, because his guidebook stated that each ferry was named for one of three guilds in Klein-Basel. But having crossed the Wettsteinbrücke, this matter was soon forgot, because he was stepping down into Klein-Basel itself and trying to get his bearings.

On this side of the Rhein, at No. 3 Am Lindenberg, stood the shop yclept Art & Antiques, sounding innocuous enough, but which shop, by and by, would make all the difference.

It was a three-story house from the thirteenth century at the pie-shaped corner of Utengasse and Rheingasse, a narrow symmetrical storefront of door-window, window-door. Different shades of ochre split the facade into halves, the division running between the windows from the street to the roof. It imparted a feeling of motley and made the storefront appear narrower than it was. The effect caused one side to appear as if it were the double or reflection of the other side. From a triangular armature of wrought iron hung a gaily painted though faded sign: Kunst und Antiquitäten / Art & Antiques. The windows were painted a deep forest green, while the heavily varnished oak doors gave an impression of hiding in shadowed recesses. Morrow elected the door on the right, pushed down on the sturdy brass handle and, as he pushed, heard the light tinkling of a bell.

The shop was dimly lit and smelled like an old sponge. From the window, a shaft of light bounced from the oaken floor upon a wicker carriage where nestled a delicate porcelain doll covered up to the chin with a quilt. A wind-up phonograph with florid horn gathered dust atop a table with sturdy legs. Marionettes reminiscent of Leonardo's grotesques, each in period dress, hung from the rafters as a gaily-attired troupe in a glass palace of chandeliers. The shaft of light bounced and refracted from object to object: a brass lamp with frosted chimney, a brass kaleidoscope, a camera obscura surrounded by plaster casts, a vase from the Ching Dynasty, an array of opium pipes, a chess set carved from ebony and stained ivory, a wooden music stand supporting an edition of Arban's Method, a display of enameled boxes, a bronze statuette of Icarus, a cabinet with glass doors enclosing leather-bound books, and a dressmaker's mannequin. There were prints and stencils and samples of damask. One wall was covered like a 19<sup>th</sup> century Salon, from floor to ceiling with oil paintings. They were mostly landscapes of uneven quality, but there was a genre scene of drunks at cards, a stern pair of husband-and-wife portraits, and a sober still life of fresh trout with gaping mouths upon a Delft platter bordered in blue.

"Guten morgen. Kann ich Ihnen helfen?" The man who spoke appeared from behind a curtain covering a portal to the deep-ochre side of the building.

"Do you speak English?" Morrow asked hopefully.

"Yes, I do."

"Then perhaps you can help me."

"That is why we are here," smiled the man. "Do you come to Basel?"

Morrow nodded in affirmation. "Visiting."

"Very good. Where do you stay?"

"With a friend from the university."

"Oh, the university. Your friend is a student?"

"No, an assistant. He assists a professor."

"He's a scholar, then."

"Yeah."

"May I ask, what does the professor ... profess?"

"He's retired. From art history, I think."

"Oh? Well, I may know this professor ..."

"Yeah? Von Bilderberg?"

"Why, yes, of course. Herr Professor von Bilderberg. We sold him a table, what was it? Yes, an exquisite table de la tranchin. Herr Professor was a client once or two times, but not now for a long time. They are not easy to find."

"What's not easy?"

"Authentic table de la tranchin. The real one is hard to find, but they make ... how do you say ... facsimiles. Ten years ago, more, they were popular."

"Real ones or facsimiles?"

"Both," smiled the dealer. "So, you are visiting."

Morrow sensed this was the only opening available. "I'm a student. Restoration."

"You study ... furniture restoration?"

"No, paintings."

"Ah. You are an art restorer."

"Well, I'm learning. So I need to buy an old painting. For practice."

"I understand." The dealer smiled again, but his expression had changed, as though he were no longer feigning an interest. "Is the support important?"

"Support?" Morrow did not recall having mentioned his improvised Fulbright to anyone other than Alex, but he suspected that something might have slipped out in making small talk.

"Yes," continued the dealer. "Do you want the painting on a wood panel? On linen, perhaps, or a copper sheet?"

"Well, linen ..."

The man nodded. "How soon do you want this painting on linen?"

"Soon." Morrow shifted his weight from foot to foot. He knew that the man was assessing more than a transaction.

"These things take time," the dealer said carefully. "But, you are lucky, maybe. I will go to the auction, tomorrow. It is an estate sale. They always sell portraits. An old portrait is not expensive, because nobody wants it and so ..."

"Age is important, and size. I need something at least one hundred centimeters by ..."

"That size could be a problem," interrupted the dealer in turn, "but there are old paintings, everywhere. All sizes."

"How old?" asked Morrow.

"Oh ... fifty years, one hundred years ..."

"Not old enough." Morrow looked at the man intently and said: "I'm trying a new technique and I need to see if ... certain solvents, will harm a canvas that is maybe three hundred years old."

The man raised his eyebrows. A moment passed. "Ahh," he said. He was stocky, something over the average height, with closely cropped hair, and he wore wire-rimmed bifocals that he was peering over. The light from the window cast a shadow over half his face. Caravaggio could have painted him as a Knight of St. John.

"It's alright," said Morrow. "If you can't help me, then you can't help me."

There was an uncomfortable silence, and then the man said: "In a day or two, why don't you visit us again? Maybe we can find something."

Morrow thought it over. For starters, he mistrusted royal pronouns. "Is Friday alright?"

"Yes. Friday will be fine. We will expect you on Friday."

"Sounds good." Morrow took a breath, relieved. "And thanks."

"Oh, you are welcome," said the man. "Enjoy your morning."

"And good luck at the auction."

"Yes."

When Morrow re-crossed the Wettsteinbrücke and again passed the Kunstmuseum, he turned up Rittergasse to have a look at the Münster, a 14<sup>th</sup> century cathedral. He was interested in its stained glass windows, but what a surprise! As it happened, the facade of the church was being sandblasted. Unbelievable! – all that convenient scaffolding with sheets of black plastic hanging over the sides or covering the windows. He was nearly jubilant just to see it. It would serve, nicely. What a day! The air was mild, and just now everything was falling into place effortlessly. What a day to be alive and to be pleased with just about everything, because he did not know that he was already in over his head.

6.

TO: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
 FROM: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
 RE: RE: (no subject)

Sounds pretty nebulous dude. There must be a hundred guys with the same name right here in the city. But who can figure Bilderberg? You, too, for that matter.

\*\*\*\*\* Original Message \*\*\*\*\*

>TO: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
 >FROM: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
 >RE: (no subject)

>Hey Josh,

>I know you hate coincidences, and this is one, so I will keep it as short as possible even though the telling requires a little ancient history. Sometime in the mid-1930s, Dr. B was studying the crossovers between Spanish and Dutch painting. At that time, his main focus was not yet Velázquez. It was the int'l style and Antonis Mor's work in the Netherlands, England, and Spain. Now fast-forward 65 years past the monographs, the histories, the trial at The Hague, the pavilion, the catalogue, his doubts about Goya's *Colossus* etc – his entire career. One might think that, by now, Dr. B has done whatever he is going to do. But no not yet, not at 89. Six months ago he was a judge at the Verona Biennale, I must have told you already, and now he has a new project and sends me to the archives to do research on Mor. Which, of course, that means also Sir Anthony and Antonio and I know what you are thinking ... Why, at this late date? I will tell you. He found an unfinished ms. somewhere and, yes, it's an old bio that he started as an undergrad, extensive too, with working title Mor, More, Moro & Co. So, after days of staring at microfiche and PDFs, I find something that looks promising and make a copy. I go to The Hasenburg (almost forgot: Chateau Lapin to you) to celebrate a job well done when this cowboy sits down at the next table and I don't know why I spoke first, so you know I was in a rare mood. It turns out the cowboy is a Fulbright fellow and a painter and his name is Anthony Morrow. Yep, pardner, y'hurd right. What do you say to that? Best yet, he was looking for a place with north light. So, I thought it through and exercised my discretion. It was a judgment call and a calculated risk, because you know how Dr. B can be about visiting scholars. Sure you do. But he didn't bat an eye or raise a brow when I told him about a Fulbright fellow with an auspicious name. He sort of smiled ... at Fate, is my best guess.

>There it is. Alex

## 7.

Meanwhile, the Putney Museum's Curator of Interpretation had decided to share the letter from the gorgeous wacko blonde whom guards had recently escorted out the door. The letter made the rounds of everyone who had been there on the day, accompanied by quips and knowing smiles and even a rumor that the rejected artist was painting reproductions in her considerable spare time. When the letter was placed in Josh's hand, he knew he would have to e-mail his old roommate, Alex, about a tale of his own.

He read the letter slowly. Below Ms. Cardui's careful signature was a postscript requesting a personal meeting at the curator's earliest convenience, and she had written a telephone number. When Josh Melrose returned the letter, he asked whether the curator had any intention to call the lady because, well, who knows?

"Not on your life," replied the curator stertorously. "Not that bitch. I don't care what she looks like."

"Right," allowed Josh. But the thought lingered all morning and by late afternoon he called the number. On answering, her voice sounded collected, but distracted. Melrose heard something like metal against glass, and Ms. Cardui said: "I've got something on the stove. Could I call you back in maybe fifteen minutes?"

"Yeah, all right. My number is ..."

"I've got it already," she said and disconnected.

He did not, at all, expect to hear from her, but she was as good as her word. Within a quarter-hour, the telephone rang and they were speaking. Josh stated that he had read her letter. Personally, he said, he had liked her painting. He did not tell her that the curator to whom her letter was addressed happened to be a colleague rather than himself. He asked whether she still wanted a personal interview, to which she replied that a conversation would be more to her liking. "Well, we could do that as soon as you like," he suggested. He tried not to sound too eager or pushy or official or insincere.

There was a moment's pause, and then Ms. Cardui said: "Are you free this evening? I mean, I realize this is very short notice ..."

"No problem," said Josh. "Yes, this evening works. I don't suppose you'd care to meet here at the museum ..."

"Not really, not at the museum, thanks."

"...so why not, I dunno, why not dinner?"

"I'm broke right now and rent's due."

"No problem. I have an expense account, so dinner will be on the museum," he said, when, truth to tell, what he had was a major credit card.

"All right," she said. "We're on."

"Good," he said. "Good. So now logistics ... Why don't you meet me at Cipriani, say right after the museum closes for the evening?"

"I can do that," she said. "But, how will I know you? I'm sorry, but I do not remember your face all that well."

"Why would you?" he replied. "Anyway, you don't need to remember me. I'll recognize you."

Ms. Cardui laughed self-consciously. "Yes, I suppose you would. Unforgettable, right?"

That evening, she arrived early and waited outside the restaurant. Josh Melrose arrived at the appointed time, found her easily and introduced himself.

Veronica shook his hand, but said: "Are you the same guy I barely remember?"

Melrose smiled sheepishly. "No. I'm the guy you spoke with over the phone. The other guy is intelligent, easy-going, tall, dark and handsome."

"No, he wasn't," smiled Veronica. "But you *are* from the museum, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Melrose. "I'm from the museum. Your letter was referred to me. I hope you don't mind meeting with me instead?"

Veronica did not immediately answer. She pursed her mouth, then relaxed and said: "I've never been in Cipriani's. Too expensive."

"This is only my second time," said Melrose. "First time was a year ago. So what do you say? Shall we?"

Veronica thought a moment. "Tell me, what exactly do you do at the museum? Are you the flak-catcher?"

Melrose laughed.

The doorman opened the door. They entered the warm ambient light, not too low, that illumined the pale yellow walls, the reddish paneling and wainscot. The clientele were well heeled, and it appeared that every table was taken. Melrose had not thought to make a reservation, but fortune smiled when the maitre d' smiled at Veronica, in her simple black dress and single-strand pearl necklace, and he said: "I'm sure we can arrange something, if mademoiselle will follow me, please."

Mr. Melrose followed Ms. Cardui. They were seated at a small intimate table near a porcelain vase of yellow roses on a rosewood stand, and they were given tall menus bound in leather.

"Rather nice, isn't it?" she said, soaking up the atmosphere. Melrose did his best to look nonchalant. This was, in fact, his first time in the restaurant, and he keenly felt his want of style. He had dressed as presentably as he could, but not so appropriately as had Ms. Cardui. In a word, she looked sensational. An obvious flair for understatement.

As they settled in, Veronica overheard the low but insistent voices of a couple at a nearby table, sparring, testing each other, trading barbs about reading each other's files.

Lawyers in love, she thought.

Melrose, too, overheard the attractive woman with auburn hair, and he recognized the dapper gentleman who was her companion. Melrose saw him from time to time, sitting in the museum's Impressionist gallery. What was his name? He was sipping scotch, eating lamb chops, and listening to the woman say something about mergers and acquisitions. "Is it more fun getting it than keeping it?" she said. He dabbed a napkin at the corners of his mouth and said: "Is this the fun part for you?" "How do you mean?" she replied. He said: "It's not the money – you like the chase." The woman picked indifferently at a fish, while the man made short work of his chops, turning his fork in the left hand after the European manner. Pure affectation, thought Veronica, but then they are lawyers at Chase Manhattan. When the man ordered burgundy and instructed the waiter to send the bottle to another table, Veronica had heard enough. She turned her attention to Melrose, who turned his attention to her as well, smiled, tilted his head toward the other couple and said: "Collector, I think. I see him from time to time. Can't think of his name."

"You said you are the curator of acquisitions, didn't you?"

"Assistant curator."

"Has he ever made a donation?"

"Oh, let's not talk shop."

"Well, what shall we talk about, to get the ball rolling?" asked Veronica. She had decided to learn something about the curator, this Josh Melrose person, before pressing her grievances about the biennial.

"Hmmm," he said. "Good question. All right, I've got a story for you. Have you ever heard of the Postfuturistic Society? Well, there's this fellow named Staffan Backlund, and he's the founder of this little organization. Staffan travels a lot; everywhere, in fact, and he collects all sorts of stuff, primitives and the like, and every now and then he makes a discovery. Including the story I'm about to tell you."

"How do you know this guy?"

"He's the friend of a friend. I met him a couple years ago at the museum. Anyway, Staffan told me this story about Helmer and Duane, both born in the 1920s. Both grew up in poor farming families, one in Sweden and one here in the US, and neither knew of the other's existence although they both became realist sculptors using similar techniques. So, two guys with similar backgrounds and similar interests ... but they had very, very different trajectories in life."

"Trajectories ..."

"Yes, that's part of it. Part of what the story's about. Helmer, the one in Sweden, had little financial support and no powerful allies, so he made sculptures for gardens while running a dry cleaning business. He even raised turkeys for a time. Helmer formed his figures from clay, and then made casts, working in fiberglass and concrete. The finished figures were life-size."

"And the figures were made for gardens?"

"Many of them. Now, on the other hand, there's Duane. Duane had an academic career and eventually he acquired an international reputation. His figures were life size, too ..."

"I think I already know who you mean."

"Of course. And, as you know, his figures were cast directly from models and made from a polyester-based resin."

"Do you like his work?"

"Well, what matters is, the King of Sweden liked it. In 1968, he pinned Duane with a medal when the Goteberg Art Museum gave him a big retrospective. Now, at the same time, in another wing of the museum, a group of irate young sculptors is in a row with the director. There's a competition, you see. And one member of the group uses his entry fee to buy one of Helmer's garden sculptures, and he plants it in the museum and, rather loudly, says something like: "I suppose this is the kind of work Herr Direktor appreciates ... authentic kitsch!" Well, the remark ended up in a widely distributed pamphlet."

"Sounds like the Stuckist group."

"Does, doesn't it? Maybe that's why they're stuck," said Melrose. "I mean, we're talking thirty years ago, in Goteberg, when this prank received wide, wide coverage in the mass media and critics were writing about humanoid lumps of concrete at the Art Hall."

"I see." Veronica leaned back in her chair. "I didn't write a pamphlet, I wrote a letter that's not been published or even distributed, for that matter," she said evenly.

"I know," said Melrose, gesturing with his hands, palms down, meaning to calm down. "The point is ..."

"Yes, what is the point?"

"The point is that Helmer and Duane were in the same venue at the same time, although one took his lumps while the other was lionized."

"So what's that got to do with ..." She stopped herself. The last thing Veronica wanted was a replay of her recent visit to the Putney. She took a deep breath, gathered herself and said: "I'm sorry. I'm listening."

"Thank you, because here's the thing: Staffan knows Helmer. He's written about him. It's thirty years later. More ... thirty-one, and Staffan says that, even today, Helmer is reluctant to call himself an artist."

"Good for Helmer."

"And you know about Duane contracting cancer from the resins that he used. Of course, he died three years ago. But you may not know that his obituary appeared in Swedish newspapers because his ancestors were Swedish."

"I'm not quite following this line of thought."

"Well, just listen a minute longer. I admit, the story's convoluted, but the end is in sight. What remains is to tell you about this fellow named Gote ..."

"This isn't a story, Mr. Melrose, it's a Russian novel."

"Please. There's this fellow named Gote, he's Helmer's cousin, and he's interested in genealogy, and he happened to see Duane's obituary. He decided to clip it and send it to Helmer, in case he hadn't seen it, because the obituary said that Duane's great-grandfather, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, had two sons. One son stayed in Vastergotland, while the other son immigrated to Minnesota. So, you've guessed it by now, right? Helmer Jarl's family also came from Vastergotland – and he and Duane Hanson had the same great-grandfather. Not only that, but their paternal grandmothers were first cousins."

"And they didn't know each other?"

"They didn't know each other."

"And they were both sculptors."

"Yes."

"One was famous, one was not, yet they exhibited together – sort of ..."

"Exactly."

"And this is a story about trajectories?"

"One could say that, yes."

Soon, Veronica would learn that Josh Melrose was a curiosity his colleagues could not classify. Staff at the Putney thought of him as approachable and capable, and one or two knew something about him. They knew he was not a bleeding heart, in the neo-conservative sense, and yet he had an account that disbursed monthly support for a child in war-torn Somalia. He preferred Trappist beer after work on Fridays. National forests, he once said after a couple bottles, should be privatized, and any tree unable to pay its own way should be harvested. Was he joking? His colleague could not tell.

Incongruously, Josh was a gray man who stood out. If the day ever came for him to stand in a police line-up, a witness would notice that he was about average height and build for a generation that had been raised on steroid-fed beef. He dressed conservatively. His trousers had cuffs. He laundered his shirts with a Korean lady who tended to pour too much starch, and his shoes were buffed to a low sheen at a news stand near the museum. He clipped his nails moderately short in accordance with Hippocrates's instructions, he showered with Asepto, and usually he remembered to floss after brushing before bed. In short, he was presentable. His face was tautly padded, his jaw was a rounded block, and his throat along the jaw had the shallow lunar shadows of adolescent acne. In a raking light, a light brown mole made his left lobe look pierced, while his brown eyes had a small fleck of blue in the right iris that Veronica noticed as she sat across from him at Cipriani. But then, one could not help but notice his gaze, as piercing as Picasso's, when it was



turned on. Aware, he tried not to stare when interested in someone, simply as a matter of etiquette. And yet, he had a habit of tugging the hair behind his right ear when listening to someone who vexed or bored him. Veronica would notice that, too, sometime later.

"So, as Russian novels go, was the story all that bad?"

Veronica smiled and shook her head. "All right. I'll give you this much. On first dates, most men tell very long stories, only the stories are about themselves."

*Date*, she heard herself say. Is that what this is?

8.

TO: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
FROM: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
RE: blondie from bloomingdales

Yeah, maybe.

\*\*\*\*\*

>TO: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
>FROM: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
>RE: blondie from bloomingdales

>Some have all the luck and half of everyone else's. Besides, I thought Celia had broken your heart and shaken your confidence and you were off women. Whatever, good luck, because I think you will need it. She sounds pretty high maintenance. Then again, you know that. Then again ... our project. Think about it. We would have to adapt some, but why not, she could be exactly what we need. Or maybe that's already occurred to you?

>You dog. Playing all the angles. All right, enough said. So think about it, and I'll think about it, and we'll both think about it. It might work. Am I right or am I right?

\*\*\*\*\* Original Message \*\*\*\*\*

>>TO: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
>>FROM: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
>>RE: blondie from bloomingdales

>>Remember the ditzzy blonde I told you about, the one showed the door? Turns out she's not such a basket case and her name is Veronica and she sent a letter to el honcho. Not a good career move, but what's she got to lose. So the letter was passed to me, and lo and behold, it wasn't full of complete loathing and angst or the usual vague threats of sabotage. And, me being a kind soul when it comes to beauteous babes, I decided to grant her request to meet with who else, el honcho, after he made it abundantly clear that he wanted no part of it. So then I call her number. We talk on the phone and she agrees to meet at Cipriani for dinner and I've got blue balls all afternoon. Alex, you would not believe what this woman does for a little black dress. Sooo ... Corner table and we order wine and you know I'm feeling right at home. I look around at everybody eating 24oz porterhouse steaks or lobster or both followed by Cointreau-drenched Kirschtorte, espresso and Davidoff cigars. Dread my next bill from Visa. So where are we, we small talk and it becomes clear that she has a brain but she barely says a word, just sits and listens while I ramble. Unnerving. It felt like high school prom, which was the last time a date scared the shit out of me. For a while I couldn't think straight. I've got this gargantuan, world-class boner and my tongue feels like cardboard. But don't worry, the Condottiere of Love came through unscathed, white plume intact. We're meeting tomorrow sometime to look at her paintings. She said she's cranking out crap, too, reproductions to pay the rent. Actually, I've already heard about this through the grapevine. They say she's pretty good. Should be interesting. Almost forgot ... Her complaints about the Putney are nothing new, though she's more articulate than most, which counts for something. Frankly, she may be right

>>Hey, what are you guys doing about Y2K compliance? Everybody here is paranoid, so we've got this committee looking at software. You wouldn't believe what's out there.

>>Later.

## 9.

Lately, there had been contra-indications. Josh Melrose was right about von Bilderberg. Who could figure him? Even Alex was beginning to have doubts about the old man's intentions. As a personal assistant of the past three years, Alex thought he was privy to all the old connoisseur's dealings, including the disposition of his considerable estate: the real properties, investments and liquid assets, certainly, but also voluminous correspondence, manuscripts, notes, rare editions, period furniture, textiles, sculpture and paintings. Their disposition was crucial, because there had been an understanding. All these holdings were to be the basis of the Bilderberg Foundation. That was the understanding. It was the reason Alex passed on the Putney, to the consternation of Josh and others who had lobbied in his favor. It was why he had stayed in Basel, instead. His Fulbright had provided for an internship of six months, after which he planned to return to New York – but Bilderberg's offer of a directorship had made the difference. What an opportunity, especially for a new Ph.D. who desired an academic life but did not wish to teach at any level! The world-class associations alone were bankable, to say nothing of the instant credibility and prestige. He would be seen as Baron Ranier Maria von Bilderberg's protege, however that might be construed – and really, it did not matter. The salary would be adequate and transmutable. That was how he saw it. Red, as in a classic BMW V8 with twin turbo.

Alex thought everything was set and in order. A will had been filed. Naturally, the execution of its provisions was awaiting *the eventuality*, as one senior probate attorney had delicately phrased it. After *the eventuality*, when the old boy was gone, the foundation would be right there on Muehltorgässlein. The house was ready as it stood. Whatever modifications the Heimatschutz might require would be waived in favor of preserving the cachet of a notably private life lived in the cultivation of higher pursuits. It was to be a museum and library with archives, a scholarly retreat to insure that the name of Bilderberg was not forgot. Not to forget the retreat's serviceability as a base for Alex's future plans and maneuvers.

But now, all of that was in doubt, because lately there had been contra-indications: telephone conferrals followed by private meetings with a lawyer who was overlooking the professor's investments and, apparently, moving funds. It was unsettling and perturbing. After all, Alex was an assistant. He was the sort who arranged things – ordinarily, small things. Fine. Granted. Stacks were neat, piles were in order. Windows were opened to a prescribed height; a table setting for one was spaced just so; and a rug placed on a floor was given full consideration of its position in relation to ranks and files of tiles or parquet. Otherwise, his world became unsettled. It became worrisome. Outside the house there was uncertainty enough, and outside is where it should stay.

Alex was certain that a new will was being drafted, and he had not a clue as to its provisions. Utterly out of the loop, his frustration was mounting, finding new summits to scale, as his decision to stay in Basel increasingly appeared to be a disastrous career move. Why, oh why, had he not gone with the Putney, when Josh held open the door? Because, quite simply, being a curator meant being a mediocrity, and, also according to his own lights, he was no mediocrity.

He was something more. Alex Kumor Ambrose was an art historian and a research assistant only by avocation. Only on the surface. But in the hours before dawn, when he would lie awake staring at a ceiling he could not see, he knew ... in every fiber ... who he really was. He now dared to admit it, and the time was coming to reveal it. Soon others, too, would know it. He was an artist. That is what he really was. He felt it in his bones.

He willed it. True, he could not draw. True, he had switched to art history after two years of studio classes in which he demonstrated an inability to paint, sculpt, or throw a pot. But skill and technique had nothing to do with conception. And he, as an artist, had the mind of the creator. He was solely, irrevocably, about the pure idea. All the rest was *kraftwerk*, by definition a concern of workers. Not everyone agreed with this view, but he had hope for the collaboration with Josh. The Project. Then again, maybe hope was the wrong word.

For too long, hope, his hope, had been trumped by experience. Before coming to Basel, his decisions, in fact all his moves, had been determined by relations with women, a Venusian race that he referenced with an antiquated phrase, 'the fair sex' – three words that have nothing to do with fair play. He had been on the mend for some time, and Basel was his sunlit ward in the sanitarium. In Basel, he had found the space to sort through the pieces, to reassemble himself – even to begin construction of the personality, or rather the personage, that he was in process of becoming. Naturally, the new identity emerged from his old self. The irony, he well knew, was that others so often assumed he was gay. And why would they not? He was, after all, insufficiently Martian. He had never played sports. He did not swagger. He took an interest in others rather than talk endlessly about himself. Worse, he was a careful dresser, and he possessed traits that often bring an assumption of homosexuality. He was mannered, circumspect, reticent and retiring. Those acquainted with him who were of a Freudian bent, and in Basel there were quite a few, tended to theorize that a domineering mother was somewhere in the shadows. But his wariness around women was an acquired aversion, and his dear old Mum had little to do with it. Aware of the current, Alex felt his attitude was the polite misogyny of an Edgar Degas, who got along well enough with Mary Cassatt, and who spent hour upon hour studying dancers. Beautiful creatures, dancers, especially when exhausted. Then, they are too tired to be practical or to care about appearances, a lesson Alex had slowly sublimated. Then, they are too tired to be anything except essential, their essence being all that mattered now he was in process of becoming a real conceptual artist, through and through.

Alex's budding career as an artist was in the same clear and present danger as was the directorship, for they were inextricably linked. It all depended on Bilderberg.

Alex could see the wave of concern rolling over the old connoisseur's face when he anticipated, and rued, posterity. The matter was not reducible to a question whether first-year students in the survey classes of the future would be toting the twelfth edition of his magisterial *A History of Western Art*. There was something else behind it, something more immediate, more visceral. Old Bilderberg did not wish to share the same fate as that of his once-renowned mentor. His mentor, too, had been a renowned authority, but all his work and discoveries went for naught. These days, his mentor's opinions were no longer cited, no longer the authority's authority, no longer the last word. If his mentor was mentioned at all, it was usually an apologetic explanation of what had happened and why. Even in the closeted and cozy world of art, the details of the story went largely unknown – details that Alex was piecing together.

In 1935, at the age of twenty-five, young Bilderberg had met Abraham Bredius, the self-professed man of science who, a generation earlier, directed the Mauritshuis or Royal Picture Gallery at The Hague. And that is where they happened to meet, the old scholar at the height of his fame and influence, while the young Bilderberg was a promising doctoral candidate who, through his interest in the painter Antonis Mor, was studying the cross-pollination between Netherlandish and Spanish art. The late-septuagenarian Bredius took an immediate interest in the much younger man, and for a time they had daily discussions

seated on the same bench in the same gallery of the Mauritshuis. What an education! It was the greatest good fortune for Bilderberg, to be learning straight from the horse's mouth. After all, three years earlier, Bredius had shaken the art world by publishing an article in the Burlington Magazine about a newly discovered Vermeer, *Man and Woman at A Spinnet*. This was not his first such discovery.

In the beginning, Bredius's reputation had rested primarily upon his expertise in respect of Rembrandt, but in 1899 his discovery of Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith* extended his influence. Soon after that, he became the director of the Mauritshuis, where he continued for nearly a quarter of a century. But the crowning glory of a lifetime of connoisseurship followed his retirement from the Mauritshuis, when Bredius was taken with the infamous *Marriage at Cana*. It was arguably the finest of all works by Vermeer, even the splendid *Supper at Emmaus*. With the exception of minor opinions to the contrary, experts were in accord: *Marriage at Cana* was Vermeer's greatest masterpiece, and its authentication was the whitest of plumes in Bredius's cap – until it was plucked. As it happened, authentication of this painting would prove to be Bredius's sole legacy and his utter undoing.

It happened this way. When the Nazis marched across Europe, many in the upper echelon of the SS became collectors of other peoples' paintings. The most voracious of them all was Hermann Goering, a chivalrous fighter pilot of the First World War and a national hero. In the mirror, he saw a cultured man who needed some paintings to match – hundreds upon hundreds, in fact, that he selected and installed in a renovated hunting lodge that rivaled a ducal palace.

Imagine Karin Hall, outside Berlin. Imagine its sylvan setting. Imagine a long colonnade lined with ranks of brown uniforms blowing into path-horns to announce the disembarkment of white uniforms from black limousines. Imagine the hall's great door, a vaginally ogival portal wide enough to accommodate the girth of Goering. Imagine marble floors and chandeliers and long corridors and galleries in which the masterworks of Europe shared the walls with racks of antlers. Imagine the split-timbered ambiance of the smugly snug hunters' sanctuary and its tall fireplace of jigsaw stone emblazoned with a crisply incised solar swastika. Such was Karin Hall, where the cream of the new order gathered for extravagant dinners and masked balls, or to admire collectibles from the Jeu de Paume.

Being a shrewd man, Goering knew value when he saw it, and he knew how to cut a deal. The shrewdest move he was to make involved the trade of several lesser Dutch masterpieces, acquired here and there, in exchange for a single masterwork authenticated by the master connoisseur, Abraham Bredius. Goering's shrewd trade was for none other than Vermeer's *Marriage at Cana*.

In 1937, an attorney named C. A. Boon had possession of the *Marriage at Cana* and showed it to Bredius. During his examination of the painting, old Bredius generously permitted young Bilderberg to inspect it closely and at length, and he even solicited the young scholar's opinion. The young connoisseur acquiesced. Although Bilderberg felt real doubt about the painting, he had no objective criteria for rejecting it other than too many unknown Vermeers had been discovered in recent memory. Beyond that, he was aware of the weight of expert opinion and the rejection of those who ran contrary to Bredius, and he knew in his bones that he could not risk a contrary opinion too early in a promising career. After Bredius's authentication, the painting was purchased through the financial support of an armaments manufacturer, Amadeus Schnappes, who donated the masterwork to the Vermeer Society. The following year, *Marriage at Cana* stole the show in an exhibition of 17<sup>th</sup> century masterworks held at the museum in Amsterdam. Both the

cognoscenti and the merely curious flocked to see it. The exhibition was a blockbuster decades before the advent of blockbuster exhibitions. *Marriage at Cana* was placed on permanent loan, and the greatest of all Vermeers might still be gracing the walls of that institution, had history and unforeseen circumstance not caught up with it.

In 1942, the Germans marched into the Netherlands. Soon after, Goering made his shrewd trade. Soon after that, a mysterious agent sold *Christ with the Adulteress*, yet another Vermeer, to an art dealer named Alois Miedl. Dealing in art was something of a sideline for Miedl, who happened to be a personal friend of Schnappes as well as a banker with ties to the Nazis. It was from Miedl that Goering acquired *Christ with the Adulteress*, and it hung proudly for a time at Karin Hall. In fact, it hung alongside *Marriage at Cana*. Goering was able to acquire both masterworks for his private collection simply because Hitler was uninterested; instead he had a penchant for Vermeer's *The Astronomer*, which was destined for the Fuehrer Museum in the acropolis planned for Linz, Austria, the fuehrer's birthplace. This higher city, which would cause everyone to forget Paris, was being designed by Albert Speer, himself an avid collector.

Then the Allies marched in. They caught up with Miedl and interrogated him in May 1945. The Allies, cooperating with Dutch officials, wanted to know about the newly discovered Vermeer. Miedl told what he knew. Although Goering had tried to hide his collection deep down a salt mine in Austria, the painting was found. After its re-discovery, police followed the chain of possession from Goering to Miedl back to the agent, and from the agent to a Mr. Han van Meegeren, whom they arrested and detained at the military command headquarters. Officials charged Meegeren with alienating Dutch masterpieces. By definition, he was a collaborator, and that label made him more than a little nervous. Selling cultural property to Nazis had ceased to be a lucrative enterprise and instead had become an offence rounded by the death penalty. When he panicked, Han van Meegeren exclaimed: "The painting in Goering's hands is not a Vermeer, but a Meegeren! I painted it!"

Having no other means to ascertain the truth of this claim, the authorities provided the collaborator with an easel and brushes. Over a period of weeks, in front of witnesses and reporters, Meegeren painted himself out of the corner. Under extreme pressure, he produced his last Vermeer, and he called it *Jesus Amidst the Doctors*. The allusion was lost on no one – and some were able to see the irony that, as a result of Goering's shrewd trade, Meegeren's forgery had facilitated the return of genuine Dutch masterpieces to their rightful place. Naturally, a well-publicized trial followed and, before the paint dried on *Jesus Amidst the Doctors*, formal charges against Han van Meegeren were reduced from collaboration to fraud, and he became something of a popular hero.

During the trial, the Court relied upon a commission of international experts. The commission included curators, connoisseurs and professors from the Netherlands, England, Italy, and Switzerland. The chair, Dr. Paul Coremans, was director of a laboratory within the Royal Fine Art Museum of Belgium. Among this panel of experts sat Dr. Ranier Maria von Bilderberg, at that time in his mid-thirties and firmly established.

The painting underwent rigorous tests and analyses. There were odd substances mixed with the paint, and cracks between the canvas and subsequent paint layers did not correspond. Moreover, the cracks appeared to have been accentuated with India ink, and dust and dirt were too uniform. In their summation, the experts found that the painting in Goering's possession was, after all, a forgery and not the nation's cultural heritage.

Everyone could see that the painting was a fraud, including those who earlier had backed the opinion of Bredius. It was not only the results of chemical analysis that

brought this sea change in opinion, but connoisseurship, as well. All one needed to do was look. Quite simply, the style was wrong: the brushwork, the composition, the gestures, everything. Anyone with an eye could see that the painting was far from a masterpiece, and so testified Bilderberg. Consequently, within the community of critics, the consensus became that the once brilliant Abraham Bredius, from the time he authenticated the fraud, had entered his dotage. Then the dominoes started to fall, as doubts about one Vermeer led to doubts about others, including some that were authenticated before the onset of senility. Not too long after the trial, old Bredius passed away, his legacy in shreds. As to the charge of perpetrating fraud, Han van Meegeren was sentenced to one year in a prison without a clubhouse – but, before incarceration, at the age of fifty-eight, he suffered a heart attack and died.

Alex had pieced together this much and turned it over in his mind. Bilderberg had never mentioned anything of the trial to him. It was a lacuna, a sizeable missing piece long buried perhaps, but surely not forgot. So, old Bilderberg. And all his quirks. Maybe, now that the days had grown short, he was turning it over in his mind, rising in the middle of the night to shuffle back and forth in his monogrammed slippers. Maybe he was assessing and reassessing. Maybe he had two minds about it.

Veronica had two minds about the commission from Anna Lorraine. At times the Fernandez portrait of Marie-Laure de Noailles *did* look like a cubist version of *Ten Lizz* – naturally, given a family resemblance. But, the Fernandez portrait was block-solid. *Ten Lizz* looked disembodied by comparison, with unstable edges and disconcerting tones. In the end, Veronica decided that the resemblance was only dark hair and dark eyes, and that was the problem. It was superficial. Marie-Laure might vaguely resemble Warhol's *Ten Lizz*, but Anna Lorraine did not resemble Fernandez's cubist countess at all. The initial impression of semblance began to dissemble, and Anna began to look more like Claudia Cardinale in *Fitzcarraldo* – the same eyes, the same line of the jaw, and the cheekbones were the same in Veronica's mind's eye, only she saw Anna's nose as more finely chiseled and her lips more sensually shaped. And there was something else. Anna Lorraine was darker than Cardinale. It was not just her raven hair, but her aura. Ordinarily, Veronica was not given to fanciful flight or to think in spectral terms but, now that she thought on it, Anna had an aura of regular attendance at seances on wet afternoons. Voilà. Surely her bathroom was mirrored from wall to infinitely reflecting wall and she lit candles around a sunken tub and kept a languorous cat in lieu of a French poodle.

Veronica's innate faculty, her critical eye, was beginning to measure and assess. She saw that, for the sake of proportion and aesthetics, Anna Lorraine's hands should have spanned an octave. She should have had the elegant fingers of a concert pianist and not the serviceable stubs of Degas' laundresses. Anna herself seemed acutely aware of the flaw, and she contrived to hide it. She camouflaged her short fingers with gaudy rings and by holding her hands closed, which made her appear less generous. Veronica had noticed this artful self-consciousness. Starting with the hands, she began to analyze her new client and to construct major and minor premises from the visual data. Drawing the right inferences, she would later realize, was another matter.

During her first ride in Anna Lorraine's sleek Bentley Arnage, name after dropped name had been strewn all along the way from Alphabet City to Midtown, like candy wrappers out the window. Names, names, names that, on the following day, sent Veronica to the public library to reacquaint herself with the Surrealists. It was a refresher course in manifestoes and irrational acts, melting watches and flaming giraffes, inscrutable men in bowler hats and nightmare landscapes. "To one insanity, we oppose another insanity." Slash an eye. Punch a prelate. Fire a revolver into a crowd. But, have fun, too, by pulling hosiery over your head and driving like a bat out of hell up the hill to the Chateau du Dé. Swim with the patrons Charles and Marie-Laure, frolic with composer Georges Auric of the fabled Les Six (Cocteau's concoction), and bounce a beach ball with an impresario, the Count de Beaumont.

Anna Lorraine had said that Beaumont was a member of the Jockey Club, only her Count was the wrong count. Étienne de Beaumont was a designer, not the Governor of Cochine-China or a Commander of the Légion d'honneur. The governor and commander was a previous Count de Beaumont, a fellow named Jean Robert Maurice Bonnin de la Bonninière. Far from the colonies, Étienne was associated with Coco Chanel and designed jewelry for her company while she financed Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

It was Coco who was the lynchpin. Coco knew Jean Cocteau and financed his theatrical ballet, *Parade*, with designs by Pablo Picasso, music by Erik Satie, choreography by Léonide Massine and dancers from Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. Among the corps de ballet, Picasso would find Olga. He would paint her, marry her, enter into her social pretensions and his so-called Duchess Period, until one day he had quite enough, thank



you, of starched collars and formal tables and, for Olga's edification, he posted a terse notice upon the door to his studio: *Je n'suis pas un gentleman!* Any portrait of Olga from that day forward suggested a praying mantis with breasts like bolts on a steel girder. All angles and jags and pointed teeth. Following the declaration, Picasso reserved his curves for Marie-Therese Walter. After *Parade*, Étienne de Beaumont opened his purse to finance another theatrical ballet, called *Mercure*. Again, it was Picasso, Satie, Massine, and the Ballet Russe.

Anna had it muddled. It was Charles, Viscount Noailles, who was a member of the Jockey Club, and he who was expelled in the aftermath of *L'Age d'Or*. Still worse, in the estimate of some, Charles was threatened with excommunication from the Church in Rome for having commissioned this notorious film, a film in which a bishop is tossed casually out an upper window. More, a character from the Marquis de Sade's *One Hundred Days of Sodom* appears much too Christ-like at the end of the film. It was all in the family, Marie-Laure being descended from the Marquis. But outside the family: *Quelle scandale!* The film caused a riot in Montmartre. It happened this way...

After a private viewing in their mansion on the Place des Etats-Unis, and by special invitation of the Noailles, the film was premiered at the Pantheon Cinema to an audience that included Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, André Gide, Gertrude Stein, Constantin Brancusi, Yves Tanguy, and André Malraux. This premiere occurred on 22 October 1930. After the screening, *L'age d'Or* passed the Board of Censors. It was released to the public on 29 November 1930, beginning its run at Studio 28 along with an exhibition mounted in the lobby of recent work by Jean Arp, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí.

There were complaints to police and editorials attacking the Noailles printed in two newspapers owned by François Coty, the Bonapartist admirer of Mussolini and perfume maker from whom Coco Chanel appropriated No. 5. Coty's right-wing newspapers alleged that *L'Age d'Or* had been made by 'devil-worshipping Judeo-Masons and Bolshevik wogs' – or other words to the effect that the film was an infection carried by foreigners.

On 3 December, came the riot. Amid smoke bombs and shouts of "Kill the Jews," clean-cut, patriotic youths (one named Ernest Sade) threw ink at the screen, beat the patrons with blackjacks, and slashed the paintings in the lobby. From the balcony, Maurice de Rothschild cried, "It's a pogrom!" Enter the police, as if choreographed by Massine. To protect public safety and morality, the Prefecture under Jean Chiappe banned the film for fifty years. In response of which the Surrealists published another manifesto, *L'Affaire de L'Age d'Or*, that asked:

"Que pensez-vous de l'interdiction par la police à film *L'age d'or* à la suite de la manifestation...?"

Where was Luis Buñuel during the manifestation? In Hollywood, meeting Charlie Chaplin. The anarchist had just contracted with Metro Goldwin Mayer. Meanwhile, as copies of the film were seized, the contrite Count wrote directly to the Pope and expressed his regret – signed, Noailles – and the scandal subsided. In the end, the ban secured the status of *L'Age d'Or*, effectuated its underground distribution, and guaranteed its continued study at the graduate level as influential classic cinema. But that is now, and this was then.

It was confusing. Contradictory facts, some germane, some not, were scattered in biographies, journals, filmed interviews, newspapers, and magazines. Early on, Veronica learned that there is a hotel on the Riviera with domes modeled upon the breasts of Belle Otero, a courtesan whose company Hemingway enjoyed, but she could find no information whatever about Room 36C. Not germane, she decided. Perhaps an anecdote for the dinner

table at Chateau de Clavary, where Picasso and the others were frequent guests of Russell Greeley and the Marquis de Gouy d'Arsy.

Dinner parties, masked balls, film premiers, art exhibitions, scandals, and vacations on the Riviera. Not the Spanish Riviera. *The Riviera*.

How did the French Riviera come to be *The Riviera*? Once there was a time when beaches were tranquil. Then came seasonal boating parties. Some say that Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald extended the season by persuading a hotel to remain open longer than usual, while others contend it was Gerald and Sara Murphy who had clout, millionaire Americans and models for Dick and Nicole Diver in *Tender Is The Night*. Still others say it was their sunbathing friend at the beach, the one with a penchant for Sara, Picasso himself.

Whoever it was who transformed the French Riviera into *The Riviera*, one thing was clear: the art world was a small world, indeed. Everyone knew everybody, and they went to the same parties, bars, and cafes.

Where to start looking in depth? Veronica pulled a name out of the hat, a name some say is peripheral. A signature with a star. She started with Jean Cocteau, who was neither precursor to, nor founder of the avant-garde, but who tried to lead it. That was the *raison d'être* for *Parade*. It also explained *Les Six*, a diverse group of composers younger than their nominal leader, Erik Satie, that came to be presented as a movement – new stars in the musical firmament, in which Cocteau arranged and named a constellation.

After the Great War, Cocteau and Les Six began to frequent *La Gaya*, a bar that would be renamed *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* after the name of a ballet by Darius Milhaud. The renamed bar's opening night had a guest list that included Picasso, Diaghilev, René Clair, Maurice Chevalier, and the long-forgotten chanteuse, Jane Bathori. Entertainment featured Cocteau and Milhaud playing percussion to George Gershwin tunes. Jean was nothing if not versatile.

By birth Cocteau was connected, and as a youth he knew the poet Anna Noailles. After the war, he met the granddaughter of a Belgian banker, Marie-Laure Bischoffsheim, and he introduced her to his artist friends, especially Picasso, who painted her portrait. Some say there was a brief affair between Marie-Laure and Jean Cocteau, others say no, because Jean was gay. Besides, in 1923 Marie-Laure married Arthur Anne Marie Charles, Vicomte de Noailles, who paid visits to the gallery owned by Picasso's longtime dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. One wonders whether Marie-Laure could pick them, because it happened that Noailles, too, was gay. Gay or not, at the screening of his film *Le Sang d'un Poete*, financed by the Noailles, Cocteau met a young woman who happened to be a niece of Tsar Alexander III. There is no doubt of his affair with Natalie Paley, and there is no doubt that he left her to be with the poet Jean Desbordes. Here, matters become murky. Cocteau continued to write letters to the Tsar's niece, and, although Natalie always denied the accusation, Cocteau upbraided her for aborting their child. It may also be the case that Marie-Laure exerted considerable influence upon her course of action. Nevertheless, the fate of Natalie's child notwithstanding, Cocteau and Marie-Laure remained friends and spent the summer of 1934 together at Villars-sur-Ollon. But then, wasn't Jean Cocteau practically everywhere? He stayed also with Coco Chanel and, for a time, lived two doors away from her shop in Monmartre. Not only did Coco support his theatrical events, she paid for cures from his addiction to opium, again and again. Later, until there was a falling out, Cocteau stayed with a young American woman at Santo Sospir, where he decorated the walls of her villa. And, a handful of years before his death, Cocteau was inducted into the French Academy – the apotheosis of an avant-garde poet.

He made Veronica uneasy. He was talented, witty, charming. He was generous in his praise of others, yet he was an ambitious and manipulative diarist who admired Hitler. Who was he, really? The short answer: He was a poet who painted and filmed gods and heroes. What was he, really? Veronica's most charitable assessment was that Cocteau was something of a chameleon, and that suggested he was hiding inside too many unanswered questions. How was he able, in Nazi-occupied France, to film *Beauty and the Beast* while bombers passed overhead? How was he able, throughout the war, to work at all? Was he Grand Master of the Prieuré de Sion and Jean XXIII during the pontificate of John XXIII, as alleged by the unreliable Pierre (de France) Plantard de Saint-Clair? Cocteau himself wrote that, as a young man, the Rosicrucian Erik Satie helped him to find himself.

Veronica winced. Oh, no... not the occult. In the old card files, handwritten or typed, still kept in narrow wooden drawers, not in the computer listings, she saw the entry: *Surrealism and the Occult*. That, she understood, could lead anywhere – to seances, UFOs, conspiracy theories, Gnostic bloodlines, esoteric rituals, black masses and shape-shifting reptilians, Enochian keys, and alchemical symbols. No, thank you. She did not note the number of the book; she did not seek the book on the shelf. This was not the time to enter a labyrinth. Been there, done that, did not buy the tee shirt. Besides, where any symbol points to numerous other signs, context slips away and meaning becomes so transmutable as to mean nothing at all. Veronica decided it was better not to become distracted with the arcane. Perhaps she already knew more than was necessary, and it was better to focus on the commission.

There was a job to do. She had to paint Anna Lorraine as if she were Marie-Laure de Noailles in the portrait by Luis Fernandez. That was all. That was enough. There was no need to trouble one's head with anything extraneous. Besides, she was too busy – busy enough, at any rate, studying Velásquez, among other things; busy enough thinking about *His Majesty On Horse*.

## 11.

“*An Andalusian Dog?* I had more to do with the screenplay than Dalí...”

– Pepin Bello, in *A Propósito de Buñuel*

ART BASEL was trying something new by scheduling films throughout the Fair. A wide screen had been erected near the Münster especially for the purpose, and that evening’s entertainment was to be an ‘advance preview’ (pre-preview) of the remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. More serious fare would follow: among others, *A Propósito de Buñuel*; Clouzot’s *The Mystery of Picasso*; and, on the last night, Welles’s *F for Fake*.

Morrow kept to the shadows around the Münster, under an unfathomable sky scratched with the slightest of silver slivers. Thankfully, it was not a dark and stormy night. The audience formed a half-moon of white folding chairs facing the screen and the frontal edifice of the cathedral. That was his immediate problem. He needed to climb the scaffold without rustling the heavy plastic, draping down. No other difficulties presented themselves, so far as he could see. It was merely a matter of making moves whenever the soundtrack permitted – when tires screeched, guns blazed, or lovers groped and grunted.

He was ready, his gray jacket rolled and hidden in a bush. He was dressed in Ninja black, and he had provisioned a tourist’s belt with the tools of the trade: a palette knife, a folding knife, a thumb chisel, a file, a pair of needle-nosed pliers, and a small tin of gray putty for making needed repairs to historical sites. Had he analyzed it, Morrow would have had difficulty explaining to himself why the putty – but, in fact, it was the first item that he stowed in the belt.

He listened and waited. The movie was about an art heist, and the audience was amused as Pierce Brosnan snapped a briefcase closed, thereby folding a stolen painting on a wooded stretcher that was the same size as the briefcase when open. And Morrow nearly laughed aloud at the detective’s line: “I love this neighborhood. Some of these broads are wearing my salary.” Enter Rene Russo, an insurance investigator, and the game was afoot. When she appeared at a black and white affair to dance with Brosnan, the music went brassily Afro-Cuban, and that’s when Morrow made his move. He slipped under the plastic and began to climb inside the scaffold. Plastic covered only the first three levels, about fifteen feet above the ground, and then he was exposed. The fourth level was high enough to reach a stained glass window, he could see that, but he stopped, collected himself, took a deep breath and looked down. He was above the plastic now and above the audience of balding heads, short skirts, and plunging necklines. The scaffold provided a sort of balcony seat – what great good fun, until he realized his mistake. He saw his shadow on the cathedral, blessedly faint, cast not from the moon but from the light bouncing off the silver screen. Then it fully dawned on him – that he was a blob at the end of a kabob. He had been a fool to wear black, a silhouette against the lighter stone of the Münster. Fortunately, the audience was glued to the beast with two backs. Tear your eyes away, Tony! Brosnan had Russo in a carnal embrace on a staircase, and, Thomas Crown being a yachtsman, he took her fore, aft, portside and starboard. Concentrate! Even more fortunate, the scene ran down the stairs, across the floor, over a table, back to the floor, and ended up in bed, with Russo lying atop Brosnan, prone, drinking champagne – a sequence just long enough for Morrow to act quickly. Mind on your work, dude! He pried loose lengths of lead piping from around the stained glass, bent them to fit the largest pocket on his belt, stuffed them in and shimmied down below the plastic as fast as he could. Screw the putty. Someone else could glaze the window while he, using vinegar, extracted an

oxide for making lead white that could not be dated. He was certain that the lead, old as it was, would not be radioactive. Its radioactivity would be down to zero.

In the shadows, for what seemed an hour, he waited and watched. He was waiting for the inevitable crisis, that critical moment before the denouement of every movie, when all eyes would be seduced and he could steal away. That moment arrived, he knew, when Thomas Crown appeared before the museum's security cameras to do a 360-turn, then placed a bowler hat on his head and said: "Let's play ball!" Music up and, just like that, as fast as Freeze-It, there were many men in bowler hats relaying brief cases up and down the stairs of the museum, suddenly appearing from nowhere as if they had rained from the sky of a Magritte painting. Then came an explosion, a smoke bomb that set alarms ringing, police running in befuddled circles and the audience to chuckling. Go! Morrow seized the moment. He slipped from behind the plastic and, in broken-field desperation, cut a juke move to lose all tacklers, glanced over his shoulder and skirted the sideline down the end-zone street, laughing, starring in his own highlights. He was jazzed – jazzed enough, had his fans only asked, to sign autographs all the way to Mühletorgässlein.

When he arrived, Bilderberg's house was dimly lit and quiet, with nothing and no one stirring. Inside, he sensed an air of eerie expectancy, as if some silent figure were sitting in a chair, listening, awaiting his return. But no, it was only his imagination; stealth and guarded glances revealed there was no one and nothing, just the low light at the bottom of the stair and a table lamp burning in the second floor library. He tried the handle and, to his surprise, the door opened. Usually the library was locked, which served to close off the second floor as a private apartment for the research assistant. Ordinarily, Alex used the main stair, which descended into the dining room and made it convenient for him to inquire after the old scholar's instructions or needs before going out. But the door opening onto the small landing of the foyer stair was unlocked, and Morrow, cat burglar on a roll, decided to creep and peep.

In the low lamplight, the room and its appointments showed well. The atmosphere was closeted, but not stiflingly musty as Morrow expected. Old man, old room, stale air, he had thought. So far as he knew, there was no charwoman, so it must be Alex who did the dusting and sweeping.

His eyes moved slowly around the room. Had the antique dealer, Hans, been present, he might have told Morrow that a particular piece, right here, was an 18th-century Nymphenburg porcelain, a pyramid to which four blackamoors with bows and arrows had been added. Meanwhile, over there was the same *table de la tronchin* that Bilderberg had purchased from his antique shop. Of course, it is named after a practical Swiss physician, one Théodore Tronchin, who thought that writers should be standing and not sitting while scribbling. Better for the circulation of blood. Finally, for those who scoff at varicose veins, there was an ebony and gilt writing desk dating prior to the Revolution, with spiral legs, gracefully turned.

But Hans was not present and Morrow, in his ignorance, was uninterested in sticks of furniture. The bookshelves were another matter. Titles leaped at him: Vasari's *Lives*, catalogues from 19<sup>th</sup> century Salons, the first volume of Richardson's biography of Pablo Picasso, Charles-Roux's biography of Coco Chanel, Lessard's book about Fernand LeGros, three volumes by Eric Hebborn, and, displayed on a stand, the magisterial Velásquez catalogue raisonné, still wrapped and uncut. But what's this? A first edition of *English As She Is Spoke*, and a complete set of Frasier's *The Golden Bough* alongside more arcane fare in facsimile editions: *Excerpta ex ultimo Testamento Raymundi Lullii; Liber de 12*

*aquis alkimye; Avataras (4 Lectures)*. There was a volume of Blavatsky's speculations, Klossowski's *Le Baphomet*, and two titles Morrow would have found of special interest, if only he had been a reader: Eliphas Lévi's *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic* and Choucha's *Surrealism and the Occult*. But they failed to register.

That was because Morrow noticed a small digital television on a shelf lined with DVDs about art – biographies, documentaries, and yes, Welles's last film, *F for Fake*. Lo and behold! He had never seen it, only heard about it. He pulled it off the shelf and scanned the dust case. All to the good: Criterion Collection, so supplements aplenty. Moreover, he saw a headset and that the DVD player had a jack port. With remote in hand, he arranged a chair and made himself comfortable.

Of course, the research assistant, Alex Kumor Ambrose, discovered the painter, Anthony Morrow, in the library watching *Fake*. Or rather, one of the supplements, because Morrow had decided first to watch the documentary, *Almost True*, which was shorter. He had been engrossed in it, until he again sensed the presence he had felt earlier – only, this time, when he looked, someone was there. He remained cool. After all, he had not been caught jimmying a wall safe.

“Oh, hi. The door was open, so ...”

“Yes,” said Alex. Twice, earlier in the week, he had been sitting and reading, when he heard Morrow try the handle. “I left it unlocked, in case you cared to have a look.”

Morrow pushed the pause-button and nodded in acknowledgment. Okay. So, it was to be a game of cat and mouse.

Alex walked over to a cabinet. “Looks like I forgot to unlock this one. A cabinet of curiosities.” He produced a key and turned the latch. The cabinet held variously shaped bottles of amber libations, among them a sixteen-year-old bottle of Lagavulin and a bottle of Auchentoshan at eighteen years of age. He sighed, as if to say ‘decisions, decisions’, then selected Talisker and filled two tumblers of cut crystal.

“Sorry,” he said. “No ice. And I’m afraid I cannot offer you any haggis to wash it down.” He handed a glass to Morrow. “Here. Try it. It’s good stuff. Cheers.”

Morrow accepted the glass. “Right. Cheers.” He took a sip of his first single malt and knew that, from this point forward, Yago rosé would have to shift for itself. Scotch, he had been told, is an acquired taste. If so, some acquired tastes must be acquired faster than others, for this one took a single sip. Morrow recognized quality when confronted with it. He understood the difference. And he understood that this newly acquired taste would require expenditure in excess of current revenues.

Alex feigned a tactical retreat. “I didn’t mean to interrupt the...”

“Oh, no problem, I can watch it another time.” When Morrow turned off the machines, it fell to him to say something of some sort or other. Small talk was not his forte.

“So, what’s... what’s goin’ on, Alex?”

“Ah... Now there’s a question. Well, you could say I’ve been thinking.”

Morrow did not know how to play it as it lays. “That can get you into trouble.”

Alex laughed a small laugh. “Well let’s hope so.”

Morrow, too, laughed, only he was careful to make it an even smaller laugh.

They stood at par, not that either was a golfer.

They sipped their scotches, and their momentary silence played like a putt from the rough. Finally, the research assistant began slowly to speak. It was awkward. It was choppy. Morrow suspected that the manner of address was for Ambrose to convince him that he had been thinking. As it happened, for Alex, the difficulty lay in ignoring the unlocked door. He had forgot to lock it after climbing the stairs for a peep into the attic,

where he had found linseed oil, a muller, a square of plate glass and divers dry pigments. Obviously, someone was about to grind his own colors, and that implied an unusual seriousness about the craft of painting. However, there was no way for him to ask about it without betraying his upstairs search. A question would place him on an equal footing with the library's stealthy visitor. That would not serve. Another difficulty lay in finding a subject other than the DVD. But Alex could not swing it, so he decided to take the penalty and drop the ball over his shoulder.

"So, what did you think of *F for Fake*?" He asked this, knowing full well the response to follow.

"Haven't got to it. Not yet. I'm looking at supplements first."

"Ah. But isn't that rather backwards? Supplements are supposed to... you know, supplement. Shouldn't one watch the film first?"

"I suppose one could do it that way." Morrow was measuring him.

Alex nodded. "Sure, you're right all right. It's not written in stone or like you would spoil a Hollywood ending. The supplements don't give anything away. Besides, you'll want to see it more than once, anyway. *Fake* bears repeated viewing."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"I guess it's well done. It's fun. It makes you think. You know what I mean, it has a certain explanatory power. Like when Welles says there are 'Lots of oysters, but few pearls'."

"You mean, you think *F for Fake* is a pearl?"

"Yes, I suppose I do. In a manner of speaking. Actually, his remark has to do with supply and demand. In a rather rarified context."

"Supply and demand, huh? I don't get it. What's that got to do with a rarified context?"

It was difficult for Alex to gauge how much Morrow knew about anything, he was that opaque. Clearly, he was a mass media maven incidentally reliant upon the printed page, one who perhaps read art history as a necessary evil and perhaps was not yet surfing cyberspace as "we stand at the threshold of a new millenium." That was the phrase, and it made the research assistant cringe each time he heard it. Pundits used it, politicians used it, but how tired it sounded in the newly wired, globalized world of the past four years, with everyone suddenly on-line or about to be, and everyone feeling that, just as suddenly as it went up, it might all come crashing down. It seemed to the research assistant that, if the world crossed over the threshold of Y2K, Morrow would be in his true element, a new breed of cat prowling the future. Generally, Morrow lent an impression of being vastly uninformed, as he was about Talisker and ART BASEL 30. Then, out of the blue, he would surprise Alex with a sharp observation. For example, he apparently knew something about Welles's *Fake* subject, Elmyr de Hory. Elmyr, he said, was without a vindictive streak, which virtue, in this world, is the trait of an also-ran. Observation made, Morrow fell silent. He went opaque. One thing was certain: he lacked reserve. It was a matter of tone. However epigrammatic, his assessments lacked academic objectivity. He failed to skewer subjects scientifically. Was Anthony Morrow a fellow Fulbright fellow? Increasingly doubtful, but did it matter? For the attentive assistant, there were other, more arcane considerations. Yes, perhaps too serendipitously, Anthony Morrow possessed the magic name, which in this moment seemed the fateful be-all and end-all.

Opaque? Alex realized that he himself was drifting, becoming opaque, and then he realized that the subject under discussion had shifted and was no longer *F for Fake*.

Morrow was saying that a remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair* was doing good business, so a movie about a divorced father who supports his children by forging modern masters had to be a surefire follow-up, because that's how Hollywood studios thought about filmmaking – bottom line first.

Ah-ha, Alex said to himself, the new subject is... what? The bottom line or a forger supporting his kids? He realized that Morrow was referring to John Myatt, who lately had been receiving a good deal of press coverage, so apparently Tony was following the trial. The story was curious, all right. In Morrow's version, it happened this way...

Scotland Yard arrested John Myatt in 1995 and charged him with conspiracy to defraud to the tune of £275,000 – a figure that, by most accounts, was a percentage of the gross. Most of the money went to John Drewe, a London proprietor whose gallery was raided by police four months after the arrest of Myatt. Police maintained that Drewe had masterminded their caper. His *modus operandi* was to pose as a connoisseur. He would ingratiate himself with a museum by letting it out that he was a potential benefactor. As a potential benefactor, he was permitted to do research in various archives. What was he researching? Nothing at all, actually. Rather, he was appropriating, adapting, and altering files. He made insertions, just as *Le Serpent Rouge* was inserted into the French national archives. He played with history; he skewed it. Drewe changed exhibition catalogues, certificates of authenticity and records of provenance. He absconded with letterheads. He used old typewriters. His fraudulent documents were used to support paintings that Myatt cranked out by the dozens, art produced alchemically from emulsion paint and K-Y Jelly.

"K-Y Jelly?"

"Think sublimation," Morrow snorted. "Anyway, Myatt's got it made. He'll get a book deal. That's a no-brainer. If the book sells, and it will, maybe a movie, 'cause we need a follow-up to *Thomas Crown*. Hey... Already the wheels are turning. I mean, isn't he doing guest spots for BBC or something?"

"Sure," said Alex, on the same page at last. "Pure synergy. Last year, Myatt and Drewe went to trial in September. Myatt was sentenced to a year in prison, where he did paintings for the guards. And, for the judge who sentenced him. I love it. So, they release him on good behavior. That was fairly recently. He gets out, only to discover that he's marketable, right? Then there's Drewe, the evil genius sentenced for conspiracy. He's still in, with five years to go and not a hint of a book deal. Ah, me. But who knows? You may be right. It's early yet."

Alex poured more scotch. "I hear his paintings may go to auction."

"Surprise, surprise," said Morrow drily.

"It wouldn't be the first time forgeries have been on the block. Rightly attributed, I mean. De Hory now sells under his own name."

Morrow scowled.

"Well, why not?" Ambrose shook his head. "What?"

The painter scrutinized the research assistant, then looked away. "When it comes to forging, celebrity rewards failure."

Ambrose raised his eyebrows. "Wait a minute. You're not a purist, are you? Or do you mean that a really competent forger will remain undetected?"

"No, a really competent forger will be detected. Some day. Elmyr was competent. He was able to pass his stuff off for a time. That's because a competent forger is good for maybe a generation. *Maybe*. But I'm talking about being a master."

"I see. Myatt isn't a master. So what? Auction houses are interested."

"Shit, man. Auctions are..." Morrow shook his head vigorously. "Look. Last year, some speculator named Joe Lewis tried to corner Christie's. You know about that?"



So ask yourself, what does that suggest? I don't know about last year, but Christie's sales for '97? Oh, yeah – two billion Fed Reserve George Washingtons, with profits of about 67 million. At least, that's what they reported. But, at the same time, they were liable for guarantees of..."

"Guarantees? Don't you mean buy-ins, like maybe..."

"No, no. Sales are *guaranteed*, right? Meaning staid old Crispin-Southy, say, pledges to pay some seller a set amount, even if his painting goes unsold. Look ... These days, guarantees can be as much as \$100 million, especially if some blockbuster is on the block. Wrap your brain around that! And each year it rises. So... just maybe the question becomes how does Crispin-Southy cover its guarantees?"

"You're asking me? I assume they'd have to jack up the prices. Or take write-offs. Both, perhaps."

"Is that all, do ya think?"

"What are you talkin'? All right, all right," allowed Ambrose. "Basically, I know what you're talking about. And mostly I agree. So there you are: we agree. The inside players know it's something of a game. The auctioneer knows it, the collector knows it, the chauffeur who overhears backseat gossip knows it, and maybe the dinner guests know it. But it's supply and demand. That's why the wheels keep turning."

"It's more than that. Art's a negotiable instrument. Art's worth its weight in..."

"Not gold. Make it ten-digit PINs." Alex refilled their glasses, swirled the amber liquid, sniffed it, and then said: "Too cynical, wouldn't you say. What I can't decide is just exactly who it is that's too cynical – we or they, or us or them."

Morrow shrugged. "I didn't make the system."

"Maybe no one did. Intentionally, I mean. Maybe it's just in the nature of things."

"Oh, please, don't tell me that you think economics is natural science?"

"I meant that greed is natural. Part of the survival instinct."

"I don't see other species accumulating more than they need. Or maybe they do, and I don't know about it. But I think that, if everything comes down to survival, and that's all, then we have no imagination. Zilch. Or, we can't implement whatever it is that we are capable of imagining."

"Imagining what?"

"I don't know. A square deal, maybe."

"Hm."

Now the lull. Morrow was disconnecting, becoming opaque. He had just noticed something on the shelf, a photocopy with the ensign of Simon Frasier University, stamped Do Not Copy. It was an interview published on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *The Xerox Book* and a follow-up exhibition that contained no painting, sculpture, or objects of any kind. The interviewee was Seth Siegelau, he who organized the *Book* and the exhibition. One participant was Daniel Buren, scheduled for ART Basel 30. Why, thought Morrow, should Buren be producing new work after 1969? That was anyone's guess, but, at the time, few artists appreciated the implications of Siegelau's project. Nor did many appreciate, at the time of its publication, the implications of still another, more famous work.

Alex Kumor Ambrose was getting sloshed. "You should read that. The guy being interviewed... what's his name? Siegelau. He's interesting, in a way. He's the guy who wrote *The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sales Agreement*. Nothing has been the same since. As the late, great Miles would say, it's a motherfucker. Can you dig it? Art's commodification, codified." He raised his glass. "Cheers."

"Yeah. A real landmark." Morrow, too, raised his glass. "Cheers."

## 12.

“As we stand at the threshold of a new millenium, with art’s historical mission having ended decades ago in its absolute conceptualization, there is no longer a basis for fabricating any thing any more. Painting is utterly nostalgic and backward looking. So is sculpture. So is video. So is performance art. So is installation. So is any cross-media alliance. Fabrication in any form, including digital technology, is as retinal as Duchamp’s *Large Glass*. The only artistic practice that is not *retardataire* is forgery. The fake has become the authentic, because it is what it is, and always will be. It stands outside time, fashion, and theory.” – Preamble to *The Basel Manifesto* (New York, 1999)

---

At coffee, Melrose lent Veronica a draft of *The Basel Manifesto* and a cassette tape of *Incognito*. She slipped the cassette into her hand-woven bag and glanced at the printout. Her face clouded while she read the preamble, and she set the manifesto aside, saying that she would read it later, at home. Not that she really thought of her apartment as being ‘home’. She shook her head, and she began slowly to speak about ‘home’ and to describe the room that she used for her studio. Of course, it was not really a studio, not really. It was a small space surrounded by four walls, and it was hard to be in that space, at times. The walls would accuse her, as would her easel, brushes and paints, when she was alone with her doubts. So, there were preparations, little rituals to be done, before she could confront the expanse of white canvas with all its potential – possibilities that too often were reduced to nothing even before she moved to pick up a brush. Then, she could not move, because there was a presence looking over her shoulder and the little rituals had failed to fend it off. Then, she withdrew to a place where she could gather herself from the depths. It was a mental image – a clear spring in a forest – and once she was there, every breath told her that she was contingent, utterly contingent, yet imbued with breath – and then slowly, gradually, the presence would retreat.

When it was gone, she was no longer alone. Always, it was the presence that made her feel alone.

She could be inundated with ideas and overwhelmed with deciding what first to do, while the clock ticked away. She heard that, too. An older, perhaps wiser painter would probably smile to know that someone so young felt desperate about having world enough and time to do what had to be done. But there it was – she felt an acute sense of urgency. Worse was when her uninvited guest would reappear, a self-assuming presence she had come to call Lord Arbiter. She was not smiling as she named it to Josh. Lord Arbiter was a malignant presence, she said – one that burned the oxygen in the room and made it difficult to breathe, that tended to remain hidden or half-revealed. But she knew the faces of his subalterns: the theorists, critics, curators and collectors who walked here and there about the earth. One was either inside their magic circle or outside in a wilderness without Solomon’s key.

“They aren’t evil geniuses,” said Josh. “They’re just people doing their jobs. I know you’re thinking that’s the Nuremberg defense, and I know their opinions can be mistaken. But really, they aren’t always wrong. And they certainly aren’t Nazis. You know that, too.”

“Do I?”

Josh changed his tack. "I understand your perspective. It's all much too clubby. Frankly, I agree. Sometimes the atmosphere is a bit incestuous. But do you really suppose that a cabal drives the art world?"

There was nothing new in that refutation. Veronica had heard it before. Josh was an apologist, however critical. She accepted that. He had to be in order to do the work that he did. And, it was always possible that she was being unreasonable. All Veronica knew was this: There were always those who told her and every other painter what to think and how to think it, while they pitched the sacrosanct tenet that art is a space of freedom. And that's what she finally told Josh.

"I suppose they have the best intentions," she said at last. "Of course, they love art. They live art. But you know what? I don't even know what art is, any more. And I'm beginning to think that the word is just air. I mean, if art wasn't worth millions, the word would be bankrupt, you know? So, I have an MFA, and I guess that means I know a little about something that is worth millions. But what's that? What did I learn? It sure isn't brain science. Art. Is it completely moribund? Or maybe the nature of creativity has changed, and now the Renaissance is wearing white coats. Sometimes I think that all the energy, all the mental flight of experimentation, has moved into the laboratory. Who knows? Maybe someday neuroscientists will tell me why I still paint. Say, have you heard of the genome project? Geneticists are trying to map DNA. It's the cartography of a New World. And, naturally, some are worried that ... you know, beyond a certain point, there be monsters."

"Like Frankenstein's, you mean."

She sipped her coffee while looking closely at Josh. "Or," she continued, "maybe the legacy of the modernists has been apportioned among too many heirs who've spent it all. Blown it, maybe. I don't know. All I know is, I'm a painter, and painters paint. Art, or whatever's left of it, will have to keep accounts without me. There isn't time enough to worry about it."

"That said, you're thinking that I'm thinking why should you go on about it, right?"

Veronica smiled at the barb. "I don't know how to say it, that's all. But I've been thinking about it, a lot. What bothers me most is that, you know, something to which I give time ... I mean the time allotted to me ... well, that something has been drained of all significance, except market value. And that's nothing but a bubble."

Josh nodded in matter-of-fact agreement. "Yup. A painting that seventy years ago sold for two thousand is selling today for tens of millions. It's nutty. The painting hasn't changed, although its physical condition may have deteriorated. Then again, we aren't talking about used cars, are we? But I take your point, or at least I think so. It's hard to do something when everything seems futile, or when everyone tells you it's futile, because it's all been done before. That's the stopper, isn't it? You're blocked from the get-go. With the market as it is, painting is no longer a way of life, it's a career choice. It's not really even painting, anymore, it's making paintings – a practice, not a calling."

"Do you think that's the attraction of primitive and naïve art? I mean, that it's made without any thought given to its commercial potential."

"Could be – you know, some notion of purity. But I think our present impasse is a sign of some sort."

"A sign? What do you mean?" Veronica asked because she had an inkling that she already knew what Josh would say, were he more than merely a sympathetic ear – say, a fellow traveler.

"Hmm." Josh thought a moment. "Where to start? Sometimes art is simply too amorphous... too slippery for discussion. You know what I mean?"

“It lacks precision. Especially in an age of mechanical reproduction and tech-speak.”

Josh smiled. “An age of simulacra and tech-speak, you mean. Not that tech-speak is always precise.”

Veronica smiled. “Simulacra, then. Have it your way. But you still haven’t answered my question – assuming you can.”

“All right. Try this: I think art is dead or dying because we are in process of eliminating humanity. Or at least what has been humanity up to now.”

Veronica thought a moment, then said: “I understand Freud’s theory of the death wish, and perhaps it explains what’s happening around us: the bomb, pollution, global warming... that whole litany of lamentations. But art is affirmative, or isn’t it?”

“Crikey. My fault. I knew I would make a muddle of it, if I said it that way.”

“So try saying it another way.”

“Okay, here goes. Do you play chess?”

Veronica was lost. “Chess? Uh, yeah, I guess so. Badly.”

“Same here, if we are talking about Gary Kasparov. You know him, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well then, you must know that he has been playing against Deep Blue.”

“Yes, and he’s winning.”

“Yes, he is. He is for now. But the day will come when the battalions of engineers who put together Deep Blue will triumph against the single individual. It’s a matter of the size of the database, the chess games stored in memory, and how fast the database can be accessed, compared, analyzed, selected, and retrieved to implement Deep Blue’s next move. Although I doubt that a techie would explain things this way, the point remains that Deep Blue will get better and better as more data are fed into it, until, one brightly shining day, Kasparov will no longer be able to beat it. And on that day, chess will be dead. We will have killed it – at least at the highest levels, because the best players will no longer be human. You know what I mean? Who wants to watch Deep Blue Version 5.5 play against Deep Blue Version 5.6? What would be the point? ‘My Dad’s computer can beat your Dad’s computer’? Who, the fuck, cares – another computer? The sad part is that I suspect even engineers will get bored with it. And chess is not the only human endeavor that’s being killed off. Art has been killed off, and we did it. Or at least we are doing it. We are in process.”

“But you’ve got to have art.”

“No, I don’t think so. Not if you’re Mr. Spock. And I think that’s where we’re heading. So, yes, I’ve heard about Dolly the Sheep and the genome project. Maybe humans have been cloned already.”

“What, *The Boys from Brazil*?”

“No, worse. Hitler liked opera, remember. There’s no room for poetry in Plato’s republic. I think we will turn ourselves into completely rational beings. No feelings or emotions whatsoever. A new ideal.”

“What about love?”

“What about it? Ask Mr. Spock. C’mon... Who needs human contact anyway – even sex? Answer: the emotionally needy. But I think that one day we will contrive a virtual reality that feels like a womb and ends in orgasm at the push of a button. Not even a genital fuck, just a mental fuck – our senses engaged, our urge satisfied, all our romantic feelings allayed by whichever combination of neurotransmitters is faster and more intense. Get your jolt right here, right now. Desire reduced to the space of a nano-second. No more longing – and for damn sure no more poetry in the advent of the super-duper Über-

menschen. We're already thinking of the advent as the next phase in human evolution. You know: our destiny 'to bravely go where no man has gone before.' Ask yourself, would an Übermensch be human? Not in a 19<sup>th</sup> century sense, of course – but he will be in a 21<sup>st</sup> century sense, when we change the definition of what it means to be human and forget our history. Besides, history will look quaint, perhaps even unreal from the standpoint of a virtual reality in which there isn't any benchmark, because Nature will have long ago been reduced to a theme park. Besides, we can always claim that anything human beings do is part of the natural order within chaos. We might start with breast implants and then gradually modify our definition to include any and all cosmetic surgical procedures. It may happen that any idea of nature, and I mean the idea itself, will become obsolete, even wrong-headed."

"Whew! What is this, *My Dinner With André*?"

Josh laughed. "Well, it may have worn off on me."

"Bet you've seen it a dozen times. God, you're bleak!"

"Well, you asked."

"About a sign."

"Yes, you did, and signs have implications."

"I see. So what's this thing, *The Basel Manifesto*?"

"Another sign."

The sign, with letters in verditer outlined in black on clear plastic, hung on two chains from the ceiling of the corridor. It read:

**Fine Art Untersuchungen : Enquêtes des beaux-arts : Fine Art Investigations**

The corridor was pale ochre and gray-green accented in black, with salt-and-pepper carpeting and a stainless steel water cooler. The corridor was on the second floor in a steel-grid building of insubstantial mirrored glass that reflected sky and trees and jets of water shooting up around a slender pole topped with a flag of pale blue and white emblem. The building was in a compound enclosed by a fence hidden in tall shrubs, and it was set back from the street, where there was an inscrutable guardhouse at an imposing wrought iron gate opening onto a drive lined with scanners, sensors and electronic eyes. Welcome to Interpol Regional Headquarters (Basel), a facility of rational clarity.

Inside, looking around the atrium-style lobby, one noticed the minimal furniture and impersonal abstract paintings. There was an elevator. There was a staircase. On balance, the lobby had the ambience of a VIP lounge down Concourse A.

Looking up, one noticed the chrome balustrades, glass partitions, and carefully spaced potted flora. And one could hear the voice of Inspector H.C. Ehrman, who was leading a tour group in conjunction with a seminar that featured Dick Tallis and Charlie Mill of Scotland Yard's newly formed Arts and Antiques Unit. The participants in the seminar were twenty-five invitees from across Europe and North America who specialize in museum security.

Inspector Ehrman was guiding everyone to a forensics laboratory. He spoke as he walked, pausing frequently to address the tour.

"Among the police initiatives to deal with the problem," he said, "is the drive to recruit specialists who will work only for the fine arts unit, which at present has but five full-time staff. The thin blue line, as some say. If we count interns, as well, it's still not enough. But we have a growing computerized network here in Europe and also in the U.S. and Canada, which, of course, is why all of you are here today. We hope that you will make contributions to that network. Sharing information. Coordinating operations. So, yes, we're expanding the scope of operations. But, at the same time, old hands like Dick, here, are getting ready to retire. So, why *are* you leaving us, Dick?"

"Ducking out, you mean? Partly because it's time for new blood," said Dick Tallis. "We're in the midst of internal reorganization at Scotland Yard, and I still prefer my old electric typewriter. I'm a dinosaur, you see. So why don't you tell them, Charlie? You're staying on for a while."

"Yes, well, let's see then. First things first," said Mill, gathering his thoughts. "To set the record straight, Dick is a wizard with Windows 98, so don't let him fool you. He does have his problems with Linux, however."

There was polite laughter, and then Mill continued: "But Inspector Ehrman is quite correct in that we're sorely short-handed, so cases sometimes get handed over to another special operations taskforce that has more immediate work that absolutely must take precedence. For example, murder – which means art's down the queue. Just now we're wrapping up an investigation of art theft that twice previously was given to different

taskforces that simply had not the time to follow through. For this and other reasons, we are long overdue for an upgrade from being a squad to being a special unit.”

“Yes, a unit,” rejoined Tallis. “We sounded too much like some UK incarnation of the LA Fine Arts Squad – and they, as I’m sure you know, were not police.”

Mill chuckled. “No, they were not.” They resumed walking.

An American invitee asked: “Besides not having enough staff, what is the actual main issue that you guys face – you know, the real challenge, as you see it?”

“Are you asking me or Charlie?” said Tallis.

“Both, I guess.”

The group paused.

“What do you think, Charlie?” said Tallis to Mill.

“Yes, well. At this time, it’s especially the Russians. The Russian economy is in the tank, more or less, and so those with money are looking for investment vehicles. Of course, fakers are equal opportunity brokers. All these guys in their little workshops in Antwerp. It’s supply and demand, really. Mind you, it’s not just the Russians who’re being taken in, it’s much more widespread. And the reason for that is that big auction houses simply can’t cope with the volume of art that they’ve been shifting.”

“Or the volume of inquiries that we’ve been shifting,” said Tallis. “There’s no way to know for a certainty, but probably half the art in circulation on the international market is forged. That’s the current estimate, and I’m afraid we haven’t the resources of Interpol.”

They resumed walking.

“Speaking of resources,” said Inspector Ehrman, opening a plate glass door at the end of the corridor, “here we are. We have arrived. This is the forensics laboratory. It opened only two months ago and we are very, very pleased, I can assure you. Let’s have a look.”

Ehrman held the door. The tour filed in.

The lab was spacious and well lit, with long counters and an array of high tech instruments for infrared micro-spectroscopy, x-ray diffraction, x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, and x-ray fluorescence, all the technology that identified the composition of varnishes and pigments, or that made repairs visible.

The tour gathered around. “With all these gadgets, it’s getting harder and harder to turn a trick,” said Inspector Ehrman. He knew what he knew and, more importantly, what he did not know, so he entreated a technician to explain the various technologies.

“We employ ultraviolet examination first, of course. But X-ray analysis is the main tool in the authentication of Old Masters,” said the technician, without preliminaries or welcoming the tour. “Our technology reveals what’s underneath supposed older works...”

“Like *Dogs at Cards*?” quipped the American.

“Excuse me?” said the technician.

“Under the painting. Have you seen *The Thomas Crown Affair*?”

The technician shook her head. “No, I guess not. Not yet.”

“You should. You’d like it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” said the technician. Then she continued: “Should questions present themselves, the next step is absorption spectrophotometry. Or, perhaps plasma spectrometry. However, these techniques require samples. We have to be very careful, because we have to take a small quantity of paint and burn it. We do that because burning reveals the sample’s spectral signature, which tells us the paint’s chemical composition. We want to know what’s in the paint. If anomalous compounds are found in the sample, for example dryers or siccatives that were unknown during the period assumed for the painting’s production, then probability becomes an almost absolute certainty that the

painting being analyzed could not have been painted during the assumed period. In which case, we have a fake. Q.E.D.”

“You sound like you’re really into your work,” said the American.

“Yes,” said the technician. “I love art.”

“Sounds great!” he said. “You’re lucky. What a great lab! It’s too much.” He would have liked to chat with her at length, but she turned elusively. Speaking generally, the technician said: “Please, have a look around, but please do not touch. We haven’t enough white gloves, I’m afraid. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thanks,” said the American.

“You’re welcome,” said the technician, over her shoulder.

As the tour group began to rotate around the counters, most invitees clasped their hands behind their backs, a gesture of self-restraint and patient inquiry. From remarks and expressions on faces, everyone was out of their depth. As the American indicated, it was too much to absorb, especially on a whirlwind tour making its way to a convention center. Inspector Ehrman conferred with Tallis and Mill, glanced at his watch and announced:

“May I have your attention, please. The bus is leaving for Lucerne in about twenty minutes, so that should allow time enough for coffee before departure. A cafeteria and restrooms are downstairs, to the right.”

Amid low murmurs, the invitees thanked the technician and began to file out, then down the stairs to the lobby, restrooms and coffee bar. Outside, the bus was pulled to the curb, waiting, its motor running.

Meanwhile, in San Francisco, Detective Tom Polhaus was taking a coffee break and eating a glazed raised when one of his networking staff said: “Excuse me, Sir.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve intercepted an encrypted JPEG from New York. The Putney. Sent to the Legion of Honor.”

“Yeah? Tell me.”

“Doesn’t say much. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Art is long, life is short.”

“Not exactly ‘the eagle has landed’ – so what is it?”

“The Mona Lisa with a mustache.”

“Curators at play?”

“Could be. Looks that way. Could be a test run, too. A couple days ago there was another Mona, but it was clean. We couldn’t find anything.”

“Anything going out from the Legion?”

“Not yet.”

“Any heads-up from Interpol?”

“Not yet.”

“So, today it’s encrypted?” Polhaus downed the last of his coffee. “All right. Red flag it. And stay on it.”

“Already done.”



## 14.

On Friday, Morrow again crossed the Wettsteinbrücke over to Art & Antiques at No. 3 Am Lindenberg. When he entered the shop, the bespectacled proprietor came out from behind a curtain.

“Kann ich Ihnen helfen?”

“I’m sorry, I still can’t speak German.”

“That’s all right. Good morning.”

“Today’s Friday. We had an appointment?” Morrow was surprised that the man did not seem to recognize him. He felt annoyance, as well, because probably the proprietor had forgot the old canvas into the bargain.

“Oh, I see – an appointment. Yes and no,” said the proprietor. “I’m Pieter. You had an appointment with Hans. My brother, Hans. He said you might be coming today.”

“Here I am.”

“Good, because I have something for you.” The man called Pieter reached behind the counter and pulled out a gray roll.

“You found a canvas for me?”

“Not quite,” said the proprietor. “I think you forgot this.” He handed the roll to Morrow.

With a jolt, Morrow instantly recognized the rolled cloth as a jacket, his gray jacket, the jacket he had worn when he took lead from the windows of the Münster.

“You left it in the bushes, I believe.”

Morrow recovered quickly. “So you were there?”

“No, not I. Hans.”

“You’re not Hans?”

“No. I’m Pieter. As I told you, Hans is my brother... my, how do you say it? He’s my ‘zwillingsbruder’.”

“Your brother.”

“More. Can you speak French?”

“A little. Not much.”

“In French, they say ‘frère jumeau’.”

“I don’t know that word either, but I think you mean ‘twin’. You are his twin brother.”

“That’s it. Twins. We are twins. I couldn’t think.”

Morrow draped the jacket over his left arm. “So, did you like the movie?”

Pieter laughed. “The movie? It’s ridiculous. But yes, I liked it. It’s fun, if I turn off my brain.”

“I thought you said that Hans found the jacket.”

“Yes, he did. I was there, too.”

Morrow nodded slowly. “Uh-huh. So you saw me, then.”

“Yes.”

Morrow nodded again. It did not add up, because the man had not recognized him at first. Or, the man had recognized him but acted as if he had not.

The man was standing with his arms folded. He shifted his weight from his left leg to his right. “I should mention that we do not have an old painting for you, still. But Hans is attending a sale. A large estate sale. Today is the last day. He can get something today, he says, for you.”

“Well, I appreciate the effort he’s taking,” Morrow said flatly. “It must be hard to find the right painting. The right age, I mean.”

There was silence a moment, as the man scrutinized Morrow’s face. Then he spoke: “Many dealers say that all valuable paintings end up here.”

“What? Here in Basel?”

“Here in Switzerland. Do you think this is a jest?”

“Then you’re referring to that warehouse in Zurich, right? The Bunker, is it?” retorted Morrow. “Perfect. The birthplace of *dada*.”

The man seemed to appreciate the irony. “One could begin in Zurich, yes.”

Morrow heard a small bell and then a high-pitched yip. Yip-yip-yip. A small dog came running from under the curtain straight to the man. Whoever-he-was bent over to collect it and cradled it in his arms. It was exceedingly nervous for a miniature poodle, the sort of dog for which Morrow would have liked nothing better than to set a mousetrap.

“This is Coco,” the man said, petting the dog to keep it from barking.

15.

“I have heard that curators have become very important, and are even spoken of as being ‘painters’ using the artists they show as a form of ‘paint’.”

– Seth Siegelaub

---

TO: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
FROM: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
RE:RE:RE: (no subject)

Still factoring. If he’s around, I’ll speak with him tonight.

\*\*\*\*\*

>TO: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
>FROM: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
>RE:RE: (no subject)

>The eagle is about to land.  
>Who do you know in London? Otherwise, d’accord.  
>What about your side of the equation?

\*\*\*\*\* Original Message \*\*\*\*\*

>>TO: jmelrose@putneymuseum.org  
>>FROM: akambrose@INFOstrasse.ch  
>>RE: (no subject)

>>Hey Josh –

>>I see postage has gone up. Sorry about that, and thanks for the photocopy. You know what I always say, textual authority begins with the choice of paper stock. Especially in this age of simulacra. Of course, nothing these days rises to the dignity of old de Chirico cranking out more of his own early work.

>>As to our little collaboration, sure. Why not two artists who do not know each other? And two different venues simultaneously, maybe New York and London? Coordinating it shouldn’t be all that tricky, given the competitive spirit. Depending upon the publicity, it could be well worth the effort, when the implications start to churn.

>>How are things with Veronica? On course, I imagine you must be hoping.

16.

"*Dada* is without pretension, as life should be."  
 – Tristan Tzara (*aka* Samy Rosenstock)

---

Morrow closed the notebook upon the quotation from Tristan Tzara and handed it back to the research assistant, who had been anticipating the Fulbright cowboy's scholarly response.

Morrow: Samy Rosenstock?

AKA: Sure.

Morrow: So that's Tzara's real name.

AKA: Sure is.

Morrow: Hm. *Dada*. The Café Voltaire, huh?

AKA: That's right. "The free air of Zurich." It must have been fun. But then, besides all their antics, the dadaists were after something ... what ... rather rarefied. I suppose you could call it unified consciousness, or something like Zen apprehension. You know what I mean.

Morrow: Yeah, I guess you could say that.

AKA: So, what would you say? Personally, I think their roots are in theosophy and the symbolist movement. Everyone was reading Blavatsky and Eliphas Levi. At the time. The Rosicrucians and the Templars were being revived. The Golden Dawn. Just think of it: Kandinsky was a theosophist. So was Klee. And don't forget, when Picasso first came to Paris, he was painting as a symbolist.

Morrow: Yeah? What about his interest in primitive art?

AKA: So-called. Apollinaire had a collection. Choucha's book, there, on the shelf. She claims that the importance of primitive art lies in a unified vision, or one could say the lack of division between the spiritual and the material. Sure. Makes sense to me. But don't you think unity would tend to undermine the dialectic? – because an African ceremonial mask defies nice neat categories; because nothing separates the functional and the esthetic – which is where Duchamp enters with his ready-mades, right? But Duchamp never signed *R. Mutt* to an African mask, did he, because a ceremonial mask is not concerned with being art, whereas his urinal was. What I mean is, to the extent that *Fountain* tried to be anti-art, it was still about art.

Morrow: Yeah, well. Anti-art *is* art. I mean, it is *now*.

AKA: Sure. It's been accommodated, absorbed, appropriated – an alchemical marriage. But let's give credit where credit is due. The urinal certainly transposed values, didn't it? Not market value, of course. What do you suppose *Fountain* would fetch at Crispin-Southy?

Morrow: *Fountain*? Beaucoup bucks.

AKA: Pure alchemy. Shit turned to gold. But I like the piece, myself.

Morrow: And the wheel on the stool. Whatever.

AKA: So, here we are, post-postmodern. The heirs.

Morrow: It's all the same.

AKA: It's the same current. Post-structuralism. Deconstruction. The same aim as *dada*. It's the revenge of the sophists, to dismantle logical structures. The manifestos are great. Have you read Hans Richter? Rational explanations for proceeding irrationally.

Morrow: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AKA: Such is paradox. The *dada* boys wanted to free themselves from rationality and balance – all the classical claptrap. Causality. Conscious volition. Richter called it the freedom not to care a damn about anything. The unrestrained Id vs. soulless modernity. Because of history, *dada* was aggressively anti-historical...right? It was in the air. James Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*. Stephen Dadelus calls history a nightmare he wants to escape. "Portrait" was written, when? It was a serial in *The Egoist* around 1915.

Alex had been pushing as hard as he could, without slipping into absolute arcana, and still he could not gauge how much Morrow knew, if anything. Sensing that another approach might get him where he wanted to go, he decided to close down the references and open up the matter:

AKA: I think something must have been in the air. Don't you?

Morrow: Well, c'mon... the First World War? Mustard gas. Mechanized trench warfare. Whatever. Completely crazy. Why? The cousins who make up Europe's ruling elite were miffed at each other. Who'd want to die in a trench for that?

AKA: Not the boys at the Café Voltaire. So ... history as nightmare. The idea was in the air. But, say... tell me what you think. What's the first movement in modern art?

Morrow: The first? I don't know. Impressionism, maybe. Others say the Pre-Raphaelites.

AKA: There you are, a reaction to industrialization. Modernity.

Morrow: What's that, ironic or something? They're reactionaries?

AKA: Well, what do you think? Except for the Italian Futurists, the avant-garde was usually looking back.

Morrow: You mean like Miles Davis introducing medieval modes into jazz – to go forward, you go back?

Surprise! The research assistant's cowboy knew something about jazz. The remark tripped Alex a split moment, but he kept his balance:

AKA: Maybe Miles read *Through the Looking Glass*. Sounds crazed, I know. Purity always does. *Dada* sought purity, the unknown and unmediated, and it worked for a time – but, in the end, *dada* became predictably spontaneous, wouldn't you agree, or at least Breton thought so. Hence the advent of surrealism. Personally, I think *dada* couldn't shake conscious volition and, at the same time, set out to shock spectators.

Morrow: Yeah, premeditated spontaneity is a bitch.

AKA: It's a bit contradictory, if you're looking for unity. Besides, they were still stuck with logical structure. I mean, the choice remained binary: a choice between the purity of the mystics and the purity of the dialecticians. No third way. You know: just let it be. Balance the contradiction. No divorce, no alchemical marriage.

Morrow: What – you mean yin and yang?

AKA: Maybe. And why not? Look what happened. Factional strife. A turf war between dadaists and surrealists. Makes me wonder what's the difference between a titanic struggle and theatre of the absurd. Think of it: anti-nationalists arguing whether the avant-garde movement is Romanian or French in origin ... Amazing pettiness. Political orthodoxy everywhere – on and on, like petty states, these artists looking to free themselves of bourgeois convention.

Morrow: *Gooooo*d thing they weren't armed ... Hey, you know what I think happened to Van Gogh? I think Theo shot him. You know, enough's enough.

AKA: Ha. I don't know... Picasso had Jarry's revolver while they devoured themselves. Really amazing, such pettiness. So much concern for bylines and reputations. No one willing to do anything anonymously. Just think of it, mon ami. Who, really, is a great artist? How about the one textbooks call 'Anonymous'? Orson Welles is right. Spot on. Who built Chartres? Does it matter who is the 'Master of Such-and-Such Altarpiece'?

Morrow: Don't kid yourself. It matters when it comes to telephone bids.

Alex suppressed a smile. There was his open lane. Inadvertently, the painter had routed the conversation to exactly where the research assistant wished to go, a detour away from alchemical transmutations and art historical chit-chat. He only needed to make the *sûge*.

AKA: Ah. Auctions. Yes, I suppose some values, like provenance, will remain, what... un-transposed?

Morrow: All right then, Alex, tell me. If *dada* couldn't pull it off, then what do you think *would* 'transpose the values of the market'?

AKA: Well now, there's a question. Talk about squaring the circle ... or circling the square. Whichever. The market square, certainly – but I doubt it's possible.

Morrow: How 'bout exposing it for what it is?

AKA: Oh, that's been done, over and again. You know that; I know that. Van Meegeren, de Hory, Lessard, and half a dozen others. Even now, with what's happening in the Myatt case. Sure, the Myatt case. Look at all the publicity. But otherwise, it's business as usual. Everything continues.

Morrow: Yeah, no shit. But, Van Meegeren. He's the acid test. So, maybe it's just a matter of ... piling up the evidence. Evidence to the contrary. Maybe the evidence hasn't reached saturation point, yet. You know what I mean: the flash point.

AKA: What's that again? You're talking the flash point of an acidic pile of saturated evidence? Jesus. 'What a wonderful thing is metaphor.' Still ... it's worth considering.

17.

"It may be swapped for stolen cars or a stash of cocaine. It becomes another form of currency." Sarah Jackson, *Art Loss Register*

---

Josh Melrose provided Veronica Cardui with a printout of short paragraphs gleaned from various sources, none with attribution.

"The important thing," he said, "is the unobstructed view, just as one cannot really see a painting if there is a nameplate attached or a florid signature. This lot may be part of the reason Van Gogh's *Irises* have been killed off, withered by price tags."

He told her that he would provide the sources, if she needed to know. He said that some were from the Internet, some were from brochures, and some were from recently published books. She did not read very far. In part, she read:

"Fine art is truly an under-appreciated investment vehicle. A painting does not always demand the bidder's respect or command the bidder's checkbook. However, we must not forget that, unlike the Dollar or the Euro, they are not making masterpieces any more. The supply is limited and precious. Meanwhile, the time is ripe for accumulation, especially if we compare art with equities. Unless one were in a difficult position, there would be little incentive for one to sell assets during an economic downturn. Collectors who refuse to sell in particular circumstances are demonstrating their conviction, by rejecting immediate cash flow and electing to hold the asset."

"The search for a metric continues – one that will provide reliable insight into the overall performance of the auctions – one that would quantify the results of various genres across price ranges. The most reliable gauge of the market may be a review of paintings offered and sold at auction. Such data would allow calculation of the compound annual growth rate of specific paintings and of a painting's annual return."

"One must not forget effective marketing techniques. Many offerings suffer the adverse effects of poorly orchestrated marketing, especially when offered at an aggressive price. Collectors tend to focus on the valuation disparity and they will look past the intrinsic value of the work."

"Why bankruptcy? Arnold Hauser (1892–1978) shifted the focus to the Dutch economic infrastructure in his widely read study *The Social History of Art* of 1951. Hauser contended that a lack of government regulations had given rise to a fiercely competitive free-market economy that was not conducive to the most innovative artists. By this model, the financial troubles of Rembrandt and of Hals in particular were seen as consequences of economic freedom and anarchy in the realm of art, for the first time in history."

"Grim." Veronica put the printout aside. "This is really grim."

"Do you think? I find it almost amusing. All the talk about metrics and market value in one breath, then in the next breath there's something about the intrinsic value of the..."



“Yeah, I noticed. But I’m not sure this is what I needed to see right now. Sorry. I can’t help it. It’s put my stomach in a knot.”

“You’re not a hard-eyed investor, that’s all. You’re too artsy-fartsy. You’re incapable of assigning a price to the spirit.”

Veronica let the remark pass without effect. She studied Josh’s face, his steady gray-green eyes, and she wondered whether he had two minds, one being that of a curator. At length she said: “Actually, yes. I would like a list of sources. I’m learning not to take anything for granted. Not even you. I mean, what you tell me.”

“You mean you don’t trust me?” he chuckled. “Where’s my pen?”

“Not now,” she insisted. “Later. You can give it to me next time.”

“All right, next time. But between now and then, you won’t trust me?”

“Not entirely,” she replied, keeping her face as straight as she could.

“Then I’ll have to work on that, won’t I?”

"I decided that I would avail myself of two groups: people of the world to support me, and go-getters to open prestigious paths for me with their slanders and jealous blunders. I did not arrive, I was going to happen. Others leaned on me ..."

– Salvador Dalí

---

Anna Lorraine Noailles sounded frantic. Veronica could not help but conjure her yet again as *Ten Lizz* when she called to say there was no need to look for a rental costume because there would be no masked ball in Glen Cove that Saturday night. She expressed regret for the postponement, as she phrased it. Disappointed? When Veronica assured her that she was not unduly so, Anna calmed, and her concern turned to Veronica's progress with her portrait in the manner of Fernandez.

"It's coming along," Veronica reassured her new client, and that day she began to paint the simulacrum.

A fortnight passed during which Anna became an increasingly frequent visitor, at first making appointments, then dropping in unannounced. As the visits became more familiar, they grew longer by increments of a quarter hour. But no matter how long she stayed, she refused to sit for her portrait, and Veronica was still reduced to working from the photograph Anna had taken of herself.

It was unnerving at first, because Veronica was unaccustomed to anyone watching her paint. More, she was unaccustomed to someone rearranging her personal space. Anna would make tea, throw pillows on the floor, light the perfumed candle on the jerryrigged coffee table (in the afternoon, too, if you please) and sit, watching Veronica while smoking elegantly long and thin black cigarettes. Before too long, Veronica enjoyed the curiously pungent aroma, and she began to regard Anna as a languid cat with a mind of its own, only this cat purred while discussing astrology, numerology, and the tarot. When Anna was not discussing wands, pentangles and the hanged man, she would ask Veronica about herself. Her tone would become confidential but, however discreet the mode, she was prying the edges. Veronica sensed it. She could feel the probe, and yet, as private as she was, she became uncommonly forthcoming about the recent past. She found herself revealing herself in spite of herself, because something in Anna's manner compelled confession. Besides, the past was public domain. The present, however, was another matter. Veronica did not discuss the present. When it came to the present, all rights were reserved.

One afternoon, there was a silence, a rather long silence, and Veronica turned to Anna because she felt an intense scrutiny. A sudden flash of light, like an extraordinarily gasping sunset, filled the room. It bathed everything and deepened shadows. Time itself felt suspended, yet Anna seemed not to notice at all. Veronica went to the window to look out. What was causing it? – but as soon as she looked, the illumination vanished. When she turned again to remark the light, Anna was sitting and watching her intently, unmoved and without expression, as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened. Veronica sensed a shift in balance and the widening of a gap in the air, yet all appeared the same as ever. A tangible deception. Instinctively, she tried to right the balance, to close the gap – to fill the space she sensed. From nowhere, she asked the question that had been on her mind since that first ride in Anna's Bentley Arnage – and she asked it before she realized she was asking it.

“Why do you call your grandmother ‘Mémère’ but you call Charles ‘Charles’?”

Anna shrugged it off. “Because she is my grandmother, of course.”

“And ‘Charles’, then?”

“Just so. Charles is Charles, Vicomte de Noailles. He was Mémère’s husband.”

Veronica tested the enthymeme. “Then he was not your grandfather?”

“No. Of course not.”

Veronica thought that Marie-Laure had been married only once, so she decided to risk the only other possibility known to her. “Do you mean that Jean Cocteau was your grandfather?”

“Cocteau? Oh, heavens no. But you’ve been doing your homework.”

Veronica did not know how to respond, because her ignorance embarrassed her still. She said: “I’ve just finished *The Difficulty of Being and Professional Secrets...*”

“One won’t find anything there,” Anna interrupted. “Jean talks around things. He likes veils, smoke, and mirrors.” She spoke of Cocteau as if he were still among the living. “No,” she continued. “Not Jean. He was Mémère’s confidante and she was his patron. But my grandfather... he is Saint-Germain. You have heard of him?”

Veronica thought the name familiar. “Wasn’t he among the haute bohème of Paris, at the time of the Lost Generation?”

“Who can say? I know only that he was crossing the Atlantic, when he met with Mémère. They had not met before, but he knew her family, of course, because Mémère was a descendant of de Sade.” Anna smiled, as though she were pleased to have let a cat out from a burlap bag. “Yes, he had children. We usually do not picture him in such a light, do we? In some circles, Mémère was a celebrity for that one reason alone, being a direct descendant of the infamous Marquis de Sade. It happened that the Count Saint-Germain recognized her on board. And, when they met and talked, they discovered that their families had known each other for quite a long time.”

“Then your grandmother was aristocracy?”

“Yes, but without a title. At that time, anyway. She acquired a title when she married Charles. Mémère may have descended from the Marquis, but her immediate forbears married below their station, you could say, so Mémère was the granddaughter of a banker in Bruxelles named Bischoffsheim. I trust you appreciate the alliteration?”

Veronica absorbed this new information. In her researches into the Surrealists, she had paid scant attention to genealogy. “Sounds like the Rothschilds.”

“Just so. They were bankers, and now they sit in the House of Lords.”

Veronica thought a moment. “Okay. If the Count St. Germain and Marie-Laure Bischofberger had...”

“Not Bischofberger. Bischoffsheim.”

“Yes. Sorry. If they had something in common, then was his family also in banking?”

“Ah, very good! Many say that. But Saint-Germain was really the son of Count Andanero and Spanish royalty. Of course, with royalty much is hidden, as I’m sure you can imagine. Poor Andanero was not, as they say, ‘born among the counts, but in the counting house’. You have to understand court gossip, and especially the Spanish court. Not that Versailles was any better. Court gossip said Count Andanero was a banker from Bordeaux – so, you see, my grandparents had something in common. My mother used to say that they decided to open a joint account.”

“But your grandmother married Charles de Noailles.”

“Yes, she did.”

Veronica fell silent.

Anna Lorraine Noailles seemed pleased that Veronica understood the implication. She, too, was a direct descendant. "I do not know the liner they were on, but the ship had dining and dancing and everything was *très romantique* and much too brief. So, there you have it. My mother was conceived on an ocean liner."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"From what I've read, your grandmother died around 1970..."

"1972."

"...then you must have been very young."

"Yes, quite young." Then Anna laughed lightly. "Like many commoners, I was born nine months after Woodstock."

Veronica missed the jest. She was calculating. "Then you were maybe three years old when she died in Paris. Did you know her?"

"We never met, but my mother told stories. Many stories, which is all she had. Her inheritance, she would say – because she was adopted. Fortunately, her foster parents were kind. They did not hide the truth from her. They had kept a letter, and they showed it to her when she came of age. But it's all so long ago – and enough family for one day, don't you think? We should let it go, for now."

Veronica let it go, while her thoughts were racing. She recalled something about memoirs. What was it? Marie-Laure's diary? No. Something about the art of compiling false memoirs. That was it, she was certain. Writing memoirs was something of a genteel pastime... at Versailles. Versailles? What about Versailles?

Of course, yes, that was where Veronica had encountered Saint-Germain, whose memoirs were a novelty, because they were reputed to be authentic. All that was two hundred years ago and more, so Anna's grandfather held an hereditary title, even if he did descend from a banker. It was furtively glamorous, at the very least. And that, decided Veronica, explained the curious aura lent to her patron, *Ten Lizz*. No wonder. Who would *not* have a curious aura, with such a lineage? Having settled the matter, Veronica felt that she understood, that she was privy to privileged information – perhaps even a secret. She was beginning to feel like a court painter.

"So tell me," said Anna out of the blue. "What about your curator?"

"My curator?"

"Yes. What's his name? I have a friend on the Board," Anna said reflexively.

"You mean Josh, then."

"Yes. Josh. Do you see him often?"

Veronica was flabbergasted. How Anna should know anything about anything was simply too much, but she contained herself. "Once in a while."

"Then you like him."

"Yes, I suppose so. He's interesting."

"Oh? What makes him so interesting?"

"I don't know," Veronica replied. What a question! It was beginning to feel like the third degree. "What makes anyone interesting? You meet someone and either you think they're interesting, or you don't. That's all."

Anna ground out her long black cigarette. "Yes, I suppose that *is* all" she said, as she gathered her purse to go. "I'm late. I must run. I'll call you."

She was gone in the batting of an eye. Just like that.

Then the floor dropped, the walls pushed out, then collapsed back in, and Veronica began to feel a void. An absence was becoming a presence. Although the manifestation of nothing was not a new phenomenon, it was more palpable than usual. For some time, the

eerie had been coming around. The cause was not Anna; not per se, although her comings and goings contributed. Nor was it entirely because she had been keeping Josh at arm's length – although finally admitting to herself that she had been keeping him at a distance possessed a considerable explanatory power. It was an absence, a hole in the air, a rend in the fabric of her existence.

Veronica felt the lack intensely. It had little to do with getting laid, although that, god knew, had been some time. But then, she had declared a moratorium – a hiatus, at least – so when she found herself thinking flesh and blood thoughts of Josh Melrose, it was unsettling. The timing was off. Here she was, sorting things out, arranging everything into nice neat rows, while he was edging closer little by little.

They were establishing a kind of pattern, meeting for coffee, yet still not meeting in the evening. She was not ready for that, and perhaps he sensed it. He had not suggested dinner since their encounter at Cipriani's. All he did was send things her way. He lent books and DVDs, and she began to reciprocate in kind, exchanging ideas in a disembodied communication. He was definitely a slow hand, and she preferred it. Beyond that, when they met for coffee, he was a midsummer torrent of ideas. She might have said as much to Anna, but something held her back. Practical considerations. Rent, she imagined. She put the thought out of her mind.

She forced herself to concentrate. She painted. While painting, she listened to Debussy's *Sacred and Profane Dances*, Satie's *Trois Gnossiennes*, and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. She cooked her spaghetti and her varnishes. She did her eros yoga and read her arcane books. Besides the printout, Josh had lent her an odd book by Pierre Klossowski in which a 'prostitute' figured as the simulacrum *par excellence*. Veronica found Klossowski obtuse, so why continue? She could not say, yet she persevered. She was uncertain where these little peregrinations – detours? – were leading. Sometimes, she felt pulled, but she could not say whether the force was centripetal or centrifugal. More, she noticed that her mode of thought was becoming a train of associations rather than a chain of syllogisms. Perhaps it always had been, but she simply had not noticed.

In college, her encounter with late postmodern feminist theorization of 'the body' caused her to think about her own 'practices', toward which she had gravitated naturally. Eros yoga was one. From conversations with Josh, she was beginning to see what she had been practicing. She was seeing it for the first time. On the whole, it was a watered down discipline packaged and renamed for American consumers – a procedure without a context; a chassis without gears; a body without heart-and-mind. The real practice of eros yoga was Tantric and, for Veronica, Tantra was beginning to appear everywhere in disguise.

Josh had mentioned Tantra could be found in surrealism. He had lent her a coffee table edition, and she had given over much time to looking at the color plates, only to come away with a perception that the surrealist notion of sexuality was entirely imbued with Tantra. Works of Dalí and Ernst, especially, were freighted with alchemical iconography, with metaphors of sacred sex and sacrificial death, because surrealism shared much with the occult, and occultism was Tantric.

That was Josh's line. In her diary, Veronica noted that sacred sex and sacrificial death had objects. The 'sacred object', whether an old king, a temple prostitute, or a chalice, was a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds, the meeting of opposite states, a means to realign and replenish psychic powers and physical forces. But she could not square the circle. Veronica knew that, in the end, Dalí became a follower of Catholic ritual, the daily sacrifice in which no man comes to the father except through the son, only Dalí seemed to be using a left-handed chalice from Bataille's version of the mass. Later still, Dalí's confessors were Mormon. How odd. That's what she entered in her diary.

There were so many questions. She would have to ask Josh, because he seemed to know. And, maybe, she would tell Josh about Anna.

19.

“Faking works by Picasso, Lowry, Nicholas de Stael and Ben Nicholson is currently favored by some forgers because they are easier to counterfeit than works by artists such as Rubens or Rembrandt.” Det Sgt Rapley (Scotland Yard) in *The Guardian*

---

“I don’t mean to push, but we could do it right here.”

Veronica weighed the proposition. It was not the proposition she was anticipating. That moment, Josh suggested that she might participate in a project. He said it would play out as a kind of performance art. It would be conceptual and collaborative. They would be working with a third party, another artist in Switzerland.

“So let me get this straight,” rehearsed Veronica. “What you and your colleague want is for me to do a Vermeer...”

“Yes and no,” Josh nearly stammered. “It’s to be a Vermeer, yes. But not a Vermeer by Vermeer.”

“That’s where you lost me.” Veronica disliked word games. She did not like circumlocutions, and Josh was taking the long way to get wherever he was going. “It’s to be a Vermeer by me, right?”

“Not exactly.”

Veronica shook her head.

Josh sensed her annoyance. “I’m sorry I haven’t explained clearly.”

His apology felt patronizing, but she contained herself. A large part of her ongoing program of self-actualized improvement lay with containing herself since the eruption at the Putney. Besides, he looked so cute standing there uncomfortably shifting his weight.

“I blew it. Sorry.”

“Apology accepted. Start over, all right?”

“Yes, please,” he said. He coughed overly politely.

This time, carefully, Josh laid out the project. He explained about Alex in Basel, who was living with and assisting the noted connoisseur Ranier Maria von Bilderberg. He told her about Hermann Goering’s collection at Karin Hall. He told her about the trial of Han van Meegeren.

"Van Meegeren painted several Vermeers, not just the one foisted upon Goering. And there's one that's missing. It was supposed to be a present for Eva Braun. That's the one we want you to paint. So, it's a Van Meegeren Vermeer."

"You mean you want me to do a copy?"

"No, not at all. It would be an original, though there are certain elements that we – Alex and I – would like in the painting. We can discuss all that as we go, because it's a collaboration."

Veronica squinted at him. "How can it be an original?"

"Easy. No one knows what the Van Meegeren looks like. No photographs, no preliminary sketches. Nothing. Your painting would be an original fake."

"An original fake."

"Yes. We'll be making it up as we go. And when it's finished, it will go to auction in two places in the same time." Josh enjoyed the look of consternation on her face. Her expression was the entire object of his last remark, the set up. "We will place the painting here in New York... and probably in London, if that works out. Alex has a contact at Crispin-Southy."

"Okay. All right. It's time for me to ask the really stupid question, isn't it? Here goes: How can a painting be auctioned in two places at the same time? You must mean a linkup. Satellite or something, right? Then you're going to make a video and put it on the 'Net, is that right?"

"No, that would be exactly what we don't want. At least not on the day. Because the painting will be in two places at the same time. Here in New York and in London."

She took a swipe at him. "Now you're playing with me."

Josh covered his face in imitation of Ali fighting Foreman in Zaire and protested: "I haven't had a chance to explain the rest – ouch! – yet. Hey..."

She poked him. "Yeah, I'll give you a chance!" And she poked him again.

"Hey! Will you please?!"

"Fuck you, Mister, and the horse you rode in on." Veronica was laughing.

"Say what? Where'd you get that?"

"Oh, my dad used to say it."

"Your dad? You mean to tell me that you have parents and a family, maybe? I thought you were just a body..."

"A sexual object?"

"A body floating in space." And with that Josh dropped his guard and clasped her arms to her side. "So what do you say? Shall we put one over on the art crowd?"

Veronica relaxed. What an unusual man he was, this Josh Melrose.

"We could do it, you know." His arms encircled her as he gazed at her intently.

"Yes, we could," said Veronica softly, almost inaudibly, and she returned his embrace. A wave rolled over her, and then she felt the undertow, but there was no reason for concern, because the lifeguard was already responding as she said: "We could do it right here, right now."

That moment, their first 'right here, right now' moment, was unlike the movies. There was no soft-focus camera, nor was the scene hard-edged neo-realist. It was 150 E. 61<sup>st</sup> Street and Josh's hideaway, or so he called it – a space that he rented on the cheap. He told her about it over an early dinner, a date Veronica arranged after Anna's impulsive departure. Dinner, by way of contrast with the flash of afternoon light, was pleasantly subdued, the low lights a wash of muted Indian yellow.

After dinner, they went to the cinema. Josh was curious to see *Eyes Wide Shut*. Touted as sexy, the critics agreed it was boring beyond belief. It could hardly be anything else, Josh said afterwards, given the somnambulant pace, Cruise's wooden performance, the improbable ritual, the mechanical orgy, the marked emotional distancing coupled with paranoia, and, worst of all, the cool blue light on Nicole Kidman's long body. Everything was blue and orange, or orange and blue. All right, he agreed with Veronica, red-orange. How unsettling. How weird.

Then again, he ventured, maybe Kubrick intended all of that.

Veronica listened and nodded, but she had said little, because she was thinking of Anna's invitation to a masked ball in Glen Cove, and the coincidence made her wonder whether *Ten Lids* might have seen the late Kubrick's final film.

After the movie, they rode to Josh's hideaway on his vintage Vespa. His studio was fronted by a scrawny, half-strangled tree set in phlegm-encrusted concrete. It was a rundown storefront on a forlorn asphalt street that was a case of criminal neglect, a lumpy patchwork of indeterminate design trisected by faded variations on a lost centerline. Next the storefront, tangled electrical lines drooped drunkenly down from a tumescent pole, saturated with creosote, that abutted a weathered brick wall impregnated with metallic spray paint, the handiwork of homeboys in Doc Martens. Indifferent scrawls of jagged lines destined to be ignored by rich gallerists like Shafrazzi, whom the homies would have dissed anyway because, as they saw it, their man SAMO had been swept up, so the best a motherfucker could do was Number Two.

Inside, the Vespa was now parked near the door, and they were together, post-Tantra, lowly breathing while sprawled on the worn divan under a pale reading lamp on a collapsed armature attached to the sagging bookshelf alongside. Right here, right now.

Outside, it was deepest night.



“Out of fear that men who follow her in the street may get a wrong idea of her feelings, this young girl employed a charming trick.” – *Soluble Fish*

---

The music throbbed as a slender girl in jet from head to toe appeared in the pulses of light, an exotic black bird with faux ostrich feathers and fingerless gloves to below the elbow, a short black dress and black garters that held shapely fishnet stockings taut all the way down to stiletto heels. Black hair, straight and shining, framed an impassive face as regular and smooth as a Venetian mask. Morrow started. Her dark eyes were spearing him. Then she hesitated, a flicker of feigned recognition passing over her face, the scarlet lips parting as if to speak, but she caught herself and continued over to the bar where she leaned across and spoke directly into the ear of a mixologist who looked as peeved as if he had been serving nothing but mineral water. He nodded in distraction, their heads touched lightly and, without looking at her, he reached for a glass hanging overhead. Unruffled, the girl turned on her heel, and her eyes again fixed upon Morrow. Again, he started. Morrow saw the fleeting smile upon the luscious mouth and knew it was meant for him, but the bird was taking wing nonetheless. She was on her way south. In a nano-second, he decided. He followed her out and stayed a discreet distance behind.

She was moving. He marveled at her purposeful stride. Did she know she was being followed? Did she sense a stalker? Of course, Morrow was not a stalker, not at all; he was just following her and hoping – because, who knows? Perhaps she would find a table at a sidewalk café, and then he might sit next to her by chance and they would strike up a conversation, if she spoke English. He thought she looked like an English speaker.

The ostrich-feather stole was wafting. She was moving faster now, even in stiletto heels, and what a sight she was. From behind, she reminded him of a horse, with the sway of her hips and the high heels lengthening her legs.

She walked all the way to Clara Platz, where she ducked into a storefront. No sign, no name, but the lights were on, and, as Alex had told him, this was not a residential district. Morrow stood around for several minutes, debating with himself. This was not the scenario he had envisioned. Across the street, two girls stood under a lamppost. They were giggling, and he was dead certain that his indecision was their entertainment. Before they could break into outright laughter, he moved toward the door. Of course, he had an idea what he would find on the other side of the door, but whatever was on the other side, should it not be what he thought it was, then it would just be whatever was on the other side.

When he entered, he found himself in a parlor. An attractive older woman was seated on a divan. She looked up from her magazine, sized him up, placed the magazine on the coffee table and said: "Good evening. What may I do for you?"

Morrow described the young woman.

"Yes, I know who you mean."

"She just came in, right?"

"No, not tonight."

"But I just saw her come in."

"No, I'm sorry. She doesn't work here. She comes by sometimes, but that's all." The woman studied Morrow's face, then added: "If you like, there is another even prettier. Care to look?"

He excused himself and went back out on the street. He walked a short way, changed his mind, then retraced his steps. On the return, the girls under the lamppost called out. Another appeared in a doorway. "Loose your way?" she asked laconically.

Morrow did not know what to say. He never knew what to say. It would not have mattered anyway to the women of Clara Platz, and it did not matter once he was back inside. The svelte Russian beauty whom he first encountered was not at all ruffled by the language barrier, nor had the Dutch masseuse who bathed him after midnight seemed to mind. And in the early morning, a lissome Thai girl, with his soluble fish in her mouth, could not have said anything at the moment had she tried. She tried anyway: "Bik!"

No sooner did she gulp the word when a discrete voice outside the door informed him that coffee and croissants would be served beginning at seven o'clock. It was oddly unnerving. Was this establishment a bordello or a bed and breakfast? He glanced at the clock on the night stand, six straight up, as the cocoa-skinned angler, a finely skilled performance artist, elegantly tongued her catch. In seconds, she had him squirming at the end of a pole, but, instead of landing the fish, she gave the line more play: "It so bik," she panted, looking up dazed.

No, she was not the young woman in black, but at least she had dark hair and dark eyes and a nice lithe body – and a fuck is fuck, for all that.

Oh, the simulacrum of passion and the rising tide of ecstasy, with croissants coming. What was this, a bed and breakfast? Of course, he knew they were not what they used to be. Brothels had changed. Oh, lost golden age! Baudelaire, with a favorite's necklace in his teeth, would have felt lost here, without a piano in the parlor, Chinese vases, potted ferns, or erotic prints on the walls. Nor was there an 'upstairs' in which to meet his current favorite. Here, in this establishment, the second and third floors were private apartments, one sublet. The parlor, even with a divan and coffee table near the door, was more like a reception room or even an office, with a desk and phone, a ledger of appointments, a menu of services, a magazine rack, and a door closed on a hallway of four doors, each of which had a poster showing cherry trees in different seasons at a palace in Japan. A sign: No Smoking. The staff, some university students, worked shifts, wore kimonos, and ate blueberry yogurt on break. Certainly it was more sedate than the venue of the previous evening, when he found himself shirtless on stage in a karaoke lounge at three in the morning, with two scantily clad chanteuses entwining his legs and toying with his zipper. All in good fun, but still... Why the need to humiliate himself before a drunken audience? And why should he be thinking such thoughts now, in the low light of a freshly painted off-white room, his mind drifting back to the lounge as the lissome girl pulls in the catch and lets it flop on deck. Excursion over, she smiles perfunctorily, whispers some nonsense in his ear, and busses his cheek. In agitation, he stares at the flatness of the ceiling, thinking 'Just go.'

She disappeared in an instant. She must have read his mood, or perhaps she had an appointment elsewhere. Whatever it was, he was relieved at her departure. The gathering light of a new day was all he could face, and the thought crossed his mind that clients, too, are not what they used to be.

He showered, alone this time. He toweled off and dressed quickly. He declined the croissants and coffee.

The woman on the divan was gone. Another woman, seated at the front desk, asked whether everything was to his liking. Nice girls, too, she observed, with a heavy Helvetian accent; and some from good families. Graciously, the new Madam accepted MasterCard, and that was fortunate, because in one night Morrow had run up a slavishly burdensome tab. He presented his card and passport. With a ballpoint, she made a small x where she wanted him to sign, compared signatures, returned his passport, and nodded:

"Thank you. Please come again."

"Ciao," he said, as off-handedly as he could manage.

"Bonne journée," said the woman at the desk.

Outside, the light was a dull mendicant gray, the air heavy. He walked hurriedly, racing against that same old recurrent sense of disgusted 'get me outta here'. For the dire want of a scourge, one of those knotted leather skin dusters favored by Dominican friars in *The Name of the Rose*, he chastized himself: 'Jerk. The card's for materials, not bar girls, ya fuck-head horn trimmer.'

It was another early morning-after, this Saturday morning, and once again time for The Protestant Hour of Economic Recriminations. Morrow was a votary of this unusually practical dispensation: one man's sin is another man's indiscretion and still another man's monthly statement. As Morrow saw it, in the weak light, being subject to a spasm made him a temple slave of the god of commercial transactions at an annual interest rate of 17% – and that fact would remain true, world without end, even were he attempting something so worthwhile as embodiment of the primordial Androgyne.

Asshole. He really did need to clean up his act, if he was going to do The Trick. Otherwise, what was the point? Why had he come to Basel? If not to hump hookers, then he needed to enforce The Big D. Discipline. If push came to shove, he knew he could manage a month's worth. He had to manage a month's worth.

He glanced at his wristwatch. The antique shop would not be open for at least two more hours. Crap, but no problem, because there was nothing like movement to give him the sense of going somewhere, and it felt good to clear the head. He needed exercise and air and like that, but dude, all things in moderation – let's not overdo it.

He pointed himself toward *Chez Prunella*, an out-of-the-way backtrack considering his destination was No. 3 Am Lindenberg, but then his brain was still a ball of navel lint.

Street lamps were cycling out. Here and there he saw lamps behind curtains pulled across private lives. Did he feel lonelier during the night or in the early morning? At least the sky was lighter now, as the rheostat in the East was turning up over Basel. It helped to chase the shadows, the warm sun rising over the low hills.

At last, there it was, the red awning of *Chez Prunella*. Oh, yeah... the awning at the dawning of the day, rhymed Morrow – and, at no extra charge, there were signs of life.

An older man and an attractively petite woman were wiping the tables and placing poles in the center holes that would hold umbrellas. Morrow sat down, turned away from the slant of morning sun. He noticed his shadow cross the table. He glanced at the menu card in its plastic stand. He caught the eye of a waitress who nodded that she saw him. She was folding silverware into paper napkins at a table beside the door.

Seemingly on cue, the town awakened. Joggers suddenly appeared; people started coming and going. He watched the joggers, breathed the air off the Rhein and, when the waitress came to his table, ordered coffee and two croissants. "Jam?" Yes, please.

Still more people came and went. Basel was bustling. What? They're everywhere: two clean-shaven Mormons in identical short sleeved shirts, black trousers and loafers, their heads regally crowned in Tour de France helmets, peddled their black bicycles past

local gentiles on leisurely strolls: a satisfied *bobo* with a kerchief around his neck; last night's Thai girl (not so leisurely on her way to where?); a yawning nanny pushing a carriage; an oblivious old rustic rustling through another edition of the *Basler-Stab*. Then came a gaggle of shopgirls, only it was too early for high-heeled shop girls, their bags slung from their shoulders, scurrying, chatting conspiratorially, unless maybe they worked at the SBB Station or something. Then a splatter of ballast from a pigeon on a wire and a cat darting under a table – no doubt a reprisal for raiding a nest. Nearby, a nerdy-looking fellow sat down and opened a laptop. Within seconds, he was utterly absorbed, watching himself in real time via satellite. He looked not the type to be anxious about Y2K, thought Morrow. Perhaps he was profiting from the scare.

The waitress reappeared with a tray, placed coffee and croissants on Morrow's table, a paper napkin enfolding a spoon, a miniature pitcher of cream and two packets of sugar. Ah. Her fragrance, mixed with Arabica, found his nose, and oh, to be a morning person. He stirred his coffee idly, counterclockwise, pulling the night into the vortex. He did it slowly, methodically. No more messing around. This was the beginning of a new regimen, the implementation of The Big D. Resolution and proclamation made, Morrow's eyes followed the waitress as she swayed over to the nerd who ordered without looking up.

By ten o'clock, Morrow had made his way to No. 3, but he was immediately at a loss when the proprietor appeared from behind the curtain. Was it Pieter or Hans? Pieter or Hans? Morrow could not tell. He knew that one of them had to have a scar or a chipped tooth – something – but it would take time to discover the distinguishing feature. The proprietor was carrying Coco, nestled in the crook of his left arm. He slowly let the little dog down to the floor, and when her hind feet touched, her curled flicking tongue licked the proprietor's cheek. Released, the dog yipped at Morrow, the pitch high and annoying, then it darted back under the curtain.

There was no top o' the morning. To spare himself embarrassment, Morrow was direct: "You have the canvas?"

The proprietor nodded. "Jah, we have something for you."

Morrow let the words hang in the air.

So did the proprietor, for a strained moment. Then, coolly, he rejoined: "Did you say that you stay in the house of Herr Professor...?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you said that."

"Yeah, I did."

"I see. Then may we ask how he is these days?"

"All right, I guess. I never really see him."

Hesitation. The proprietor peered over his glasses. "You don't see him?"

"I stay upstairs, he stays downstairs. I know, it sounds a little strange, but I only see his assistant."

The proprietor nodded knowingly. "Mr. Ambrose. Yes. Very strange."

"You know him?"

"We have met."

Morrow scanned the proprietor's features. "Sorry to ask, but are you Pieter or Hans?"

The proprietor smiled. "Guess."

Fine, Morrow thought; fifty-fifty. "Pieter?"

"Hans."

"Right."

“And, likewise, I am sorry to ask you again: How long do you stay in Basel?”

“Hard to say.”

“A month? Two months maybe?”

“Why do you ask?”

The proprietor tried to sound offhand: “Oh, I thought maybe you are interested to do some work sometime. If you have time. If it does not interrupt your studies.”

“Work? What kind of work?”

“Your kind of work. The same as you study. Restoration.”

“Oh? You’d pay me to restore stuff?”

“Exactly.”

Morrow tried to sound shrewd: “That can be expensive.”

“Yes, maybe. Also, we can trade. Maybe you can do some work and you can have the painting I find for you. It is expensive, too, so we trade. We can do a trial. A test. If the result is good, maybe we can do more.”

“A test. Painting for painting, straight across?”

“Why not?” The proprietor removed his glasses and checked the lenses against the shaft of light from the window. He did not clean them, but replaced them snugly on his nose. “Yes, why not?”

“Why me?”

“We need a restorer. You are not completely a stranger, because you stay with our old client. We have to try someone, so why not you?”

Morrow considered the matter quickly. What was the angle? The proposal was unusual, granted, but it did not sound deranged. Besides, he had used his credit card for girls, not materials. Maybe this was a break. And besides, he always worked better under pressure. Extra work, a little outside pressure, might help him to enforce The Big D. He decided quickly.

“Okay, why not. I’ll just take it with me and...”

The proprietor balked. “No, that is not our idea. We think you can work here and then everyone is happy. No need to worry. We get to know each other better.”

Morrow looked around the shop. “Here? There’s no room.”

“There is a workshop.” The proprietor pointed his finger upwardly, in the manner of a Templar signifying. “Up there.”

“Upstairs?”

“Yes, of course. We have everything you need. No?”

“Everything I need?” Morrow looked intently at the proprietor.

“Yes, everything. Why not have a look?”

## 21.

“Indeed, each man is as well-stocked with words as he is with sense.”

Pierre Abélard, Prologue to *Sic et Non*

The summer revolved like a pair of giddy goats dancing at an ecstatic rave with a northeast zephyr to their heels. Six months before the meltdown of Y2K, it could not have been otherwise, with François Lyotard theorizing we would never reach the metaphorical millenium, with Woodstock ‘99 slated, with George W. Bush announcing his candidacy, and with the Big Apple’s last Checker Cab forced into retirement, although happily it fetched \$135,000 at auction. “Not too shabby for an ol’ horsecart with half a million clicks,” said a dispatcher the following day. “Just goes to show. You gotta change the oil, coz regular maintenance pays dividends.”

As a curator, Josh knew about the auction from the *Antiques & Art* newsletter, but lassitude was overtaking him. Lately he had been letting curatorial work slide. An acute sense of disconnection was trailing him through the corridors and galleries of the Putney, a realization that he had no desire to continue as an assistant curator. It was not that he was unable to imagine himself as a full curator in another five years. He could not see himself in any position, at all, in another five months. Consequently, being a practical man, social drinking helped for a time to ease the matter in his mind. After a shot or two, a ‘career’ at the Putney appeared more as a distraction from, than as a blockage of, his gut-basic aims. Besides...

There were more pressing matters at hand. Toothbrushes, for example. What in beginning had been casual chat had become a serious dialogue. He and Veronica were not living together, not yet, but they were forgetting toothbrushes and clothes at each other’s digs as regularly as a cab needs a change of oil. The toothbrushes might have signified something, had the heat permitted them to think straight. But, like everyone in Manhattan, they were enjoying the weather, that relentlessly long walk to the dog days of August, as the whole city slept on top its sheets, with its air conditioners full-on or with its windows open and fans turned up high enough for brownouts.

At the same time, a glacier continued to melt in Switzerland. Why was the glacier receding? A generously funded study of data collected over the course of a waning 20<sup>th</sup> century had concluded that alpine nights were getting warmer. Who would have guessed?

Not Morrow. Morrow was as unaware of melting glaciers as he was of the news reports around a fatal canyoning accident that claimed twenty-one lives in Interlaken. He had more immediate concerns. He was focused and busy dividing his time between Alex’s project and a piece of restoration work at No. 3 Am Lindenberg, neither of which was his own. He kept his own project, his real project, to himself.

“The paint needs to dry some,” he would tell Alex or Pieter or Hans, one of the three, on different days. It was true enough – wet-in-wet was not what was needed, but the excuse was really the means for Morrow to pursue *His Majesty On Horse*, coming along at a canter.

He was fortunate that restoration rhymed with his project. The only problem was time, there being too many items in his checkout basket, too many orders in the queue. But he was a fast worker when he painted, his hand racing to keep abreast of his thoughts. And he was fortunate that, for the most part, all three of his new associates left him to work in

relatively uninterrupted peace. Had you asked Morrow, he would not have admitted that perhaps they had a sense of their new *wunderkind*. He would have replied that he had merely demonstrated his ability to do what they needed, that they seemed satisfied with the result, and that they therefore gave him the mental space that he needed.

To all appearances, everything was progressing swimmingly. Of course, he hit the wall from time to time, nothing unusual in that, and he was never satisfied, especially when it came to *His Majesty On Horse*.

Had he not been so focused, he might have taken a moment to pat himself on the back. So far, his implementation of The Big D had gone without a glitch. He did not return to the Clara Platz or search for the waitress at the SBB Station. Then again, there was nothing unusual in that. Painting and screwing seemed to have the same motor. When he was working, his libido was spelunking in the Alps. The opposite was true after the last brushstroke: before he cleaned his brush in gum turpentine, his libido would be climbing the Third Flatiron without a top rope.

Alex's project was a lark. Painting a 'de Hory' Vermeer was not so demanding as trying to produce a 'Vermeer' Vermeer. He thought it must be so, that the life of a fake is only a generation. These days, only Elmyr's stiff lutenist looks similar to a Vermeer; the rest of his faux oeuvre appears pudgily cartoonish. As for Myatt's knock-offs, for Morrow they looked only remotely like the real thing. They were not up to the mark.

From time to time, fake Picassos, fake Modiglianis, even fake Rembrandts came to light. But a fake Goya? Goya wanted to paint like Velásquez. A fake Velásquez? It was out of reach. Even deconstructing Velásquez was out of reach, as Picasso proved canvas after canvas, in dozens of unresolved variations on *Las Meninas*.

Perfection may be only an abstract impossibility for postmoderns; but still, in the end, the notion of perfection cast a long shadow upon that which Morrow was attempting. He knew it in his bones. 'Good enough' would never be good enough. That was Morrow, inside and out. When it came to *His Majesty On Horse*, again and again he scraped off his best effort, only to begin yet again, late at night in candlelight, or with the first light of the following day – unless, of course, he had to be upstairs across the river.

Cleaning, patching, and in-painting over isolation layers of thinned damar varnish; cooking an adhesive of beeswax and balsam; or, grinding dry pigments into linseed oil for an equestrian portrait, on a canvas measuring 87 by 71 centimeters, of that lantern-jawed Hapsberg, King Philip IV of Spain.

Such were his days, divided between the attic at Mühletorgässlein and the third floor at Am Lindenberg. With all the back and forth walking he was doing, with all the ascending and descending of stairs – not to forget that, for the sake of Velásquez he had sworn off a newly acquired taste for single malts that he could not afford anyway – his belt was loosening. He was certain that he had dropped a couple pounds. He was feeling lean and mean – mean enough to face the alate ferocity of the bronze basilisk that guarded the Wettstein Bridge, a monumental monster he passed on the crossover. It was just short of kitsch. Somehow, he was growing fond of it, mostly because there was nothing quite like the basilisk back in Boulder.

“Merde.” – Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* (Act I, Sc. 1)

---

In Boulder, meanwhile, a suburban garage band was sweltering in the doldrums of summer break. The Art Guerillas, after appropriating their new name from The Art Bears, decided they were a multi-media performance group. Being second-year art students, they were bored to the bone with everything but Nietzsche and the now-headless Nirvana. One breezeless evening they were sitting around sharing a couple lines and, having nothing better to do, they began to fantasize scenarios for some mischief or other that would get them noticed like the London Stuckists. Something in the public arena.

To a man, and one young woman, they decided by show of hands to re-construct the scandal surrounding *L'Age d'Or*. Why, do that? Well, Zed had recognized that Y2K would be the seventieth anniversary of the film – so do the math: 1999 was its seventieth anniversary-minus-one, he said, and, to his ears, ‘sixty-nine’ had a subversively round Sadean sound. It was a lightning bolt of inspiration. If Zed could do anything, it was think outside the box. With his cogent explication, they were off and running. First, they did two more lines. Then Jon-E realized they had no Mycenae like the Viscount de Noailles, and, worse luck, they were flat broke. But not without hope: Alpha did have the loan of a videocamera while his father was away on business in São Paulo; Zed had ‘some junk’ he said he could pawn; X Byker Mike occasionally dealt dope and could put up the proceeds; and Feta remembered how to make papier-mâché from the time she was in Campfire Girls – and so on, everyone having resources or special talents that had gone unused since they entered university. They scribbled ideas on bits of paper, free associations that Feta drew from a cardboard box that Zed held over her head in lieu of a blindfold, but also because her figure was fine, even to die for. Whatever the random order she withdrew, that would be the script for their videotape-in-progress, once it was in progress, and everyone agreed that this project should take priority over all other work, and that it would be in homage to, and an alchemical appropriation of, the surrealistic classic. For the title, Feta suggested *L'Age de Merde*, which won narrowly over *How I Spent My Summer Vacation*.

The ideas Feta pulled from the box and read aloud suggested similar scenarios. Repetition was unsurprising given their experiences lived within the homogeneity of Arcadian subdivisions gridded with sedate drives, pocket parks, manicured lawns, and rational trees. Still all was not lost. Young artists on the cutting edge, heirs presumptive to the old *avant-garde*, tend, as their forebears tended, to slip through the cracks in the middle class. Sooner or later, someone in the Art Guerillas would think of something.

Inside a week, production was underway. They were filming. The videotape began with a dog trying to mount a cat; then, in a bid to be topical, jump-cut to two priests, one making advances in the confessional, the other misconducting with an altar boy.

“It’s too derivative,” Feta criticized.

It-Nama countered: “It’s like a *hommage*, get it?”

“So, it’s like a *hommage*. Okay. I get it. But still...”

They went to Zed, because he looked like Basquiat, and taped him as he sprayed water-soluble slogans on windows along the Pearl Street Mall: “Nietzsche Recycles!” “Make a better world!” “Change your life!” – and an anagram, “Fuck U KFC!”



Soon they were debating It-Nama's suggestion to tape everything, no matter how mundane. With motion carried, the Art Guerillas were swept suddenly by a heady feeling of the significance of their every word and gesture, as they took turns pointing the camera.

[SCENE: A suburban four-car garage. PAN: The Art Guerillas, sitting on amplifiers and folding chairs. They are mostly fiddling around when Alpha is visited by a brainstorm.]

Alpha: "I've got it. Something to get us rolling."

Zed (taping): "We *are* rolling..."

Alpha: "No, listen. Breton's description of the basic surrealist act. You know – firing a revolver into a crowd."

Feta: "Huh?"

Alpha: "Remember? But we use blanks, right? At the mall."

Feta (countering): "Rubber rounds would be better. More realistic for shoppers."

Alpha (shrugs): "Whatever."

Zed (still taping; with real interest): "The mall?"

Alpha: "Yeah, the mall."

Zed (anxiously): "Not Pearl Street again!?"

Alpha: "No... on Baseline. You know, the new one."

Feta: "Oh, yeah. *The Flatirons*. But it's not open yet."

Alpha: "Saturday's the grand opening, don't you know? Should be packed."

Feta: "Why would I know?"

Alpha and Zed (goading): "Because you're a girl."

Feta (one of the boys; she lets it slide): "So what are you talking?"

Alpha: "I'm talking street theatre, in the mall."

Zed: "What about the script?"

Alpha: "Fuck script. I'm talking improv. This'll be absolutely spontaneous."

Zed (nods): "Sounds good, dude. So then, we'd better get ready."

Alpha: "That's what I'm saying."

Feta: "Yeah, well, we need a plan already."

Alpha: "Not a problem. I'm already on it, like 24/7."

X Byker Mike (shaking his head emphatically): "We can't do that, dude. No way."

Alpha: "Why? What's the prob?"

X Byker Mike: "What's the prob!? Columbine, man! What's wrong with you?"

Alpha: "Oh, shit! Yeah, okay, what the fuck! Columbine. The shooting. So I spaced it! But we don't hafta do it here, you know, in Colorado. Do we? 'Coz, like, we could take it on the road. Right? Yeah. A location shoot, on the road. That's it."

Feta: "Tsk, you really need to do more drugs, A. You know what I'm sayin'?"

[Black out.]

The Art Guerillas may have run out of videotape momentarily, but at least they were moving. That was the point. "I'm in." "Cool." "Sounds good." So, they were in agreement, and that's what really mattered. They were going to do something. Exactly what was still unclear, but it would work itself out.

## 23.

“...and they will read me without any danger.” – Marquis de Sade  
quoted in Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbor*

“They did not object to anything. They found it all exquisite.” – Luis Buñuel

It was the birthright of Marie-Laure to be a patron in the manner of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a woman of letters who conducted a salon and was on amicable terms with fashionable society while engaging in soirees and arranging luncheons for artists and poets. It was fun to romp with Charles, Étienne de Beaumont, and Georges Auric in the *Chateau du Dé*, because Man Ray’s film showcased their villa at Hyères, of severely modern design by Mallet-Stevens. It was gratifying to be behind the scenes of *Un Chien Andalou*, a film that brought the right sort of notoriety and perhaps a concern for the correct spelling of one’s name. Was it unsettling, then, for the Noailles, after a private screening of *L’Age d’Or*? Were they appalled upon seeing their most recent venture? Were they unsettled by the guests in their Paris apartment, where after the screening they fêted Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí and the other surrealists? While still the shank of the evening, two stellar lights of the avant-garde firmament, Tristan Tzara and André Thirion, overturned the buffet – and not for the reason one might suspect, given their acceptance of the Noailles’ invitation to attend an evening with fellow signators of the *Second Manifesto*. No, the reason for the outburst was not disgust with caviar so much as intolerance of patronage from members of the very class that the surrealists had sworn to bring down. The Noailles must have known that, but they took Tzara and Thirion in stride and arranged for the public release of Luis Buñuel’s film. Why did they continue?

Not only a patron, Charles de Noailles was a collector who in 1929 purchased a manuscript long thought to have been lost, a story that Marie-Laure’s great-great-grandfather had written while imprisoned in the Bastille. Was the Marquis’ manuscript her destiny? Did she feel a rush of antinomian adrenalin when Charles acquired the scroll?

The surrealists admired *The 120 Days of Sodom* and they lauded Sade the libertine lord in the *Second Manifesto*. Then Charles commissioned Buñuel, who had signed the manifesto, to make another film. He was a houseguest at Hyères, where he wrote the script, each evening reading to the Viscount and Viscountess what he had penned that day. Then came production of *L’Age d’Or*, which went over budget, then a screening and an overturned buffet. Then the film was released, followed by a scandalous riot or a riotous scandal at Studio 28 – an early demonstration of the consequences of intertextuality and determinate meaning. The scandal was proof positive that norms and transgressions need each other. After all, *L’Age d’Or* ended with the four protagonists of Sade’s scroll – a bishop, a magistrate, a financier, and a duke – departing a debauchery of four month’s duration. More, the Duc de Blangis looked like Jesus of Nazareth, which might have been overlooked had Sade not described the duke as possessing a priapic member twelve inches in length and seven inches in circumference, put to graphic use in a numbingly depraved tale of incest, torture, mutilation, and murder without the story being an ironic *reductio*. The Marquis’ *magnum opus* simply leaves readers hanging, and without apology. As for *L’Age d’Or*, its utility for the surrealist project lay in its having not a whit of redeeming social value. That was the point. Because, as Klossowski suggests, the collectivity always

senses what is, rightly or wrongly, harmful to it, the official wheels began to turn: fragrant François Coty's newspaper attacked the film, anti-Jewish sentiments were aroused, a rightwing youth group went on a rampage, the police banned the film, and Charles was barred from the Jockey Club and threatened with excommunication from the Church of Rome. Cocteau was right: 'Quelle scandale!' In the end, the Viscount's mother interceded in his behalf, while he wrote directly to the Pope.

The weight of history. The older skirmishes of the Impressionists and the Fauves and the Cubists pale in comparison. When it comes to scandals, there is before *L'Age d'Or* and there is after *L'Age d'Or*.

Ever since the scandal, cutting-edgers have tried to summon a simulacrum of its notoriety, by submerging crucifixes in urine or by nailing themselves to Volkswagens or by issuing that modest manifesto which is the artist's statement. Ho-hum. Such events are found on page three, as the saying goes. They are discussed at conferences and symposia, which implies that, with the avant-garde long absorbed into the mainstream, such gestures are dry slices of leftover cake – especially in 1999 A.D.G. (l'Age Digital d'Globalizàtion). It was an impasse. Worse case, maybe Danto was right. For suburban cutting-edgers in the global village, the impasse might have been articulated by, then wrongly ascribed, to Marie Antoinette: What are rebels to do, *mangent de la brioche*?

## 24.

“Like me, the students talked a great deal but did very little; as Breton would have said, action had become just about as impossible as scandal.”  
 – Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*

"Propaganda is propaganda regardless of the purpose for which it is used."  
 – Ted Kaczynski, *The Unabomber Manifesto*

---

On 14 July, the Art Guerillas went on-line with *Virtually Actual*. Each member made a contribution to the manifesto. Feta's contribution was a single line preface: "Art workers unite!" X Byker Myke wrote an ahistorical think piece about Adolph Hitler as a performance artist who combined Artaud's theatre of cruelty with the precision of a Busby Berkeley revue. Other members had other obsessions, usually in the guise of postmodern surrealist acts. One call to action immediately caught the electronic eyes of Interpol, some passing Guerilla-speak about undermining bourgeois values. It suggested flooding the art market with fakes, an anodyne with a precedent: Magritte had produced funny money.

Art Guerillas mentioned nothing of the performance at the new Flatirons Mall, because they had decided to take the show on the road. Their idea became to coordinate with Woodstock '99, only that was happening too far away, so they opted to perform in the birthplace of the counterculture, where the nearest art museum from Golden Gate Park was The Palace of the Legion of Honor. The Palace was chosen because the Guerillas planned to assault the enormity that was Western civilization. The columns of the Palace were a dead-on classical reference – anyone could see that – and popular culture could be covered, too, if they taped their performance inside the Palace, around the *Portrait of Carlotta*.

"You know... Kim Novak? *Vertigo*?" Feta had to explain what she meant to everyone in the garage band, yet she insisted the reference was not at all esoteric. She clinched the argument with an irrefutable factoid: "Everybody knows. Oh, that's right, you guys don't watch cable, like The American Movie Channel, is that it? Too bad then, you don't know... coz everybody else does!"

California, here they come.

They drove out in two cars, westbound on I-70 to I-15, then north to I-80 which could have taken them across Utah and the wastes of Nevada directly into the city, if they had managed it. They even made arrangements of a sort. A friend from university hailed from Vacaville, not too far from San Francisco, and he suggested that the Guerillas could crash at his parent's renovated farmhouse while Mom and Dad were away for a fortnight's respite in their cabin at Lake Tahoe. More, he wanted to be a part of whatever was going down, as did a couple of his old friends from Country High who were at San Francisco State. It was the coolest digital clockwork. Overnight, the ranks of the Art Guerillas were swelling and might have continued to swell had the founders not been the first to leave the budding movement. It happened this way: instead of crashing in Vacaville, they crashed elsewhere.

X Byker Myke had some peyote buttons in his kit, as he called it. He was from Tonbridge Wells and enrolled in his third American institution of higher learning because his pharmaceuticals-peddling pater was flush. His many interests, outside banging drums and making art, included traditional tribal medicine. To the other Guerillas, X-B was

something of an older sibling, though he never presumed to steal Alpha's thunder as the Original Kong. He was cool. Everything was cool.

Feta was his bird now, ever since she and Jon-E and Alpha and Zed had decided in the middle of second semester that a ménage à quatre was too hard to manage equitably – and, anyway, too hard to schedule during midterms. No problem. Everyone was cool.

They were the Art Guerillas. They were on the road. They had been been drinking since the Eisenhower Tunnel and saluting the sun since Green River. Mostly they drove within Utah's posted limits, but they slowed to a paranoid crawl through Nephi, Provo, Orem, Sandy and Murray. One had to be careful. All five towns looked heavily armed. That was the thing about Utah. Many people abstained from coffee, chocolate, tobacco, and alcohol, but they were willing enough to sell it to you. Alpha thought it best to be wary around such folk. In the lead car, Alpha felt there was no need to arouse decent citizens or Mormon police. When he turned west at Salt Lake City, he picked up the pace a little, but he was still looking in the sideview mirror.

The two-lane blacktop stretched as far as an eye could see, with no one in sight, so X Byker Myke flashed his headlights and pulled up alongside. Through the open window, Feta yelled to Alpha: "Hey, ya wanna race?"

"What?" Alpha turned down some music.

"Race! Ya wanna race?!"

"Save it f' later," yelled Alpha. "There's radar along here!"

"Radar?"

"Yeah, radar! I'm pretty sure!"

"Oh, c'mon..." yelled X-B.

"Later!" Alpha turned the music back up, a classic from The English Beat.

About a hundred miles or so west of Salt Lake City, Alpha turned at Exit 4. He had been there once before and he recalled a little spot down the road called the Salt Flats Café, where they might pump gas and chow down. He also recalled that, down the road a piece from the café, there is a sign: Welcome to Bonneville Salt Flats. That was the big letters. The fine print basically said to enjoy all the table salt and please don't pee on it. The sign had a state seal in the upper left to make it an official admonition.

When the other Guerillas saw the forever of the Flats, they agreed without a show of hands that the time had come to drop the hammer.

"Gentlemen," announced Alpha, looking out across the sparkling void. "To your engines!"

"Gentlemen?!" mocked Feta, as she ducked into the car. "Get him!"

They lined up the cars, revved the engines and popped the clutches. It was not the cleanest of starts, but it raised a cloud and sent them hurtling flat out.

Whaaaaaaaaaaaa... across the Salt Flats, the two cars speeding nose to nose, with Jon-E taping it all. X-B made a crack about Pamela Anderson's widely downloaded home video and that did it – Feta had to give him a hummer then and there, the competition now on two levels. "Let's make a memory. Something we can tell our kids," she quipped.

"Go for it!" X-B kept his hands on the wheel and focused as best he could, his gray eyes on the horizon, his fly unzipped, the needle fluttering around 125 mph.

Everything might have stayed under control except for an unforeseen bump. It was not the biggest bump on the Flats, but it was big enough. The bump sent the car airborne for one heady moment of fleeting eternity. Then, in a nano-second, the problem became how to keep the car's nose up when landing. There was no time to study a textbook on the

subject, and it was a hard landing that transformed Feta's slight but charming overbite into a sprung bear trap locked upon a member of the band, instantaneously followed by X-B's spasmodic jerking of the wheel.

Of course, that jerk sent the car careening obliquely into the competition – bam! – and both cars went rolling, rolling, rolling. Overhead, the pilot of a passing single prop witnessed the crash and radioed in.

Sometime later in the heat of the day, State Troopers from Wendover counted four rolls for one car and five rolls for the other. Once bodies were bagged and measurements made, a cleanup commenced of the debris scattered across hundreds of square yards.

Somehow, all was not lost. The videocamera and a slender notebook had come through the mishap, altogether intact.

Evidence. It was collected and secured. There really was no need to demonstrate its integrity or to establish a chain of custody. There would be no jury trial, no bench trial, no indictment, no arraignment, no formal charge. There would only be transfer, analysis, and disposition of the evidence, followed by an investigation of conspiracy that raised red flags and sent advisories all down the line and across the network of the wired world of auction-house art and museum security.

The videotape and notebook were transferred from Wendover to Salt Lake City. For reason that the evidence pointed to an interstate conspiracy, the FBI was brought in. So was ATF, and without a turf war.

However retro and Warhol-derived, the Art Guerillas had taped their every move. Feta was of special interest to three investigators who were working late. With pizza and beer, they sat down to watch her mimicry of Pamela Anderson, frame by frame, then at normal speed, until the car went sailing and the world went topsy-turvy. When the car came down, the tape became so blurred that no one could make out very much, but they could hear the last words of the Guerilla with the camera – "Oh, shit!" – then a distorted charivari that lasted 2.3 long seconds.

Blackout.

"Psychoanalysis...went on the assumption that, because the artist was neurotic, the content of his work was also neurotic, which is to say that it did not stand in correct relation to reality." – Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*

---

Advisories traveled fast. The following day, authorities in Salt Lake made contact with authorities in San Francisco and at the Palace of the Legion of Honor. The director of the museum had received numerous communications, and he was instructed to make direct contact with Detective Tom Polhaus, whose team for several weeks had been tracking e-mail between the Legion and the Putney Museum. Polhaus was taking a coffee break and eating a glazed raised when one of his networking staff said: "Excuse me, Sir. The Palace is calling."

"Very funny," said Polhaus drily.

"No, really. The Director's on line 4, Sir."

"What's it this time?"

"That thing in Salt Lake. Sounds complicated, Sir."

It happened that Detective Polhaus had not yet read the advisory, but he had read the morning summary, so he was more or less informed in the premises when he spoke with the director of the Legion. That is, he knew of the Art Guerillas, their crash, their videotape and notebook. Of course, it was the notebook that concerned everyone most. But exactly what was in that notebook, he could not say. The morning summary was just that, a summary. By nine o'clock, even the advisory was behind the curve, because new information went out every few minutes as the network coordinated between local police, the feds, Interpol, museum security services, even auction houses. Wire services were clued in later.

From an update, the director of the Legion was surprised to learn of a connection between events in Utah and the Putney. This was the reason he was calling, to ascertain what Tom Polhaus could tell him in that regard, but it was the director who informed the detective of the connection. He also imparted what little he knew of the notebook.

The notebook outlined a plan for videotaping an 'attack' inside the Palace of the Legion of Honor, in front of the *Portrait of Carlotta*. Guerillas wearing Venetian masks of papier maché intended to stage a mock shooting spree. The 'shooter' was to wear a tee shirt emblazoned with the slogan, 'Systematic Oppression by Ruling Elites'. Spray paint would outline the 'bodies'. Once outlined, the 'dead' would get up to leave the scene.

"Rather ill-conceived, I'd say," said the Director. "Exactly how these Art Guerillas hoped to get past the guards, I don't know. I suppose that's anyone's guess – unless they had inside help. Something like that. Someone to open a Staff Only entrance."

"That's the working hypothesis," said Detective Polhaus. Embarrassed, he wanted to sound abreast of things.

In fact, Polhaus was right. That was the working hypothesis, as the FBI questioned two curators who had sent encrypted e-mail between the Legion and the Putney.

Beyond that, the notebook had e-mail and street addresses for a co-conspirator who lived in Vacaville, and he was brought in for questioning.

Meanwhile, graphologists and psychologists attended every nuance of Zed's (real name, Simon Garfunkel Johnson, after his parents' favorite folk singers) loopily articulate draft for the preface to *The Second Manifesto*:

"All right, Rimbaud. Got it, Rilke. We have to change our lives.

So, we're talking better world. Dialectical materialism vs. positivist materialism, with both camps in sole possession of rationality. As if rationality were enlightenment. Check it out. No one remembers the Enclarism's millennialist hopes for the French Revolution or talks about the international workers' utopia or about the national socialists' thousand-year Reich. They presented themselves like secular kingdoms of heaven.

How uniquely different were/are these visions? In the end, both camps want the end of the private life. Both camps end in bureaucracy. Both camps have ruling elites.

Where does it end?

As a new generation of activist artists, we are the latch-key heirs. André Breton wanted a culture of the proletariat that taps into the collective subconscious. It's available to all, he said – but this proletariat culture would flow from a few men of pure doctrine. That, he said, would lead to the emancipation of the human being. That's how Breton saw it: an elite of intellectual poets in a classless society of workers. Sounds good, huh.

If that doesn't sound so good, suppose we skip an elite of intellectuals. Anyone for Mao's cultural revolution? Flag-waving and accordion music that comes down from the top. No? Then how about Year One in Cambodia? You know: "This summer, send your kid to a re-education camp" with the Red Guard (or Hitler Youth)!"

What's the difference between intolerance of the right or of the left? Between bloodbaths of the right and bloodbaths of the left – all in the name of building a better world. That's how it plays out.

You're thinking, God Bless America? Before you dream that *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* is not, or agree with Fukuyama that history is over, or take the PNAC Pledge, check it out.

Over against left-right extremism, we find the capitalist utopia of sprawl, strip malls, long commutes in SUVs, greenhouse gasses, designer jeans and designer genes, sweat shops, television channels with round-the-clock mud wrestling, liposuction, self-help books, junk food, anti-depressants, cut-rate viagra, lobbyists, platoons of lawyers and accountants, off-shore tax havens and numbered accounts, undeclared wars, mindless video games, decayed inner cities, well-watered golf courses in deserts, and, for healthy eaters, a wide variety of organic low-fat multi-grain flakes mixed with fruit and nuts. It's unconscionable. It's unsustainable. We've got to find another way ..."

In Salt Lake City, an irritated ATF agent threw a printout down. "Unconscionable? Unsustainable? Fuckin' art fag! Have you read this Green shit? Where do they get their values? Who pulled this jerk's chain and asked him to flush?"

"Hey, c'mon, it's just kids..." began another, immediately interrupted:

"Yeah? They're fuckin' crazy. All of 'em."

"That's right."

And crazies have company, because cyberspace was an ever-expanding population of anonymous bloggers. Within a week, there was a leak. Internal investigations had yet to find exactly who was the culprit, but it was too late anyway. *Rolling Stone* picked up the story and mentioned *Virtually Actual* and its rudimentary blog. The BBC, Reuters and API immediately followed suit, while publishing the URL.

The videotape was on-line. So was the notebook, converted to PDF. Both were heavily downloaded, mostly in Japan, but also in Germany, France, Canada, Australia, the



UK and the USA. Suddenly, the Art Guerillas were underground celebrities within the mainstream. Their ideas were discussed and interpreted, especially a suggestion to flood the art market with fakes. This suggestion caught the attention of Art Watch Security, a major source of bulletins to museums and auction houses, which, like other unregulated markets, correct themselves.

Interpol, less certain of this article of faith, was following developments closely. Their ongoing investigation indicated that the Guerillas' connections were international in scope, with triangulation between San Francisco, Boulder, and New York, to be sure, but also between New York, Basel, and London – or so it appeared. However small, Interpol's dedicated team of fine art investigators was busily ferreting out a connection between the Art Guerillas and a rabble of agitators called the Stuckists, who were locking horns with Tate Modern.

Meanwhile, at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, an ambitious freelance writer on assignment to trace the Art Guerillas was being monitored as he marched from gallery to gallery. A distinguished looking guard trailed him at a discreet distance, yet close enough that his patiently resonant baritone was clearly audible – "May I help you?" – when the exasperated journalist muttered: "Where's the fucking *Portrait of Carlotta*?"

Meanwhile, at the Putney Museum, Josh Melrose was disturbed when a colleague was called into the Director's office for questioning. More, he was incredulous to be informed of his own connection to the Art Guerillas. "Me?" he heard himself say. After all, he had never heard of them, at least not until the latest circular came from Art Watch Security. But circulars were about happenings somewhere else, as Duchamp observed: "D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres ..."

He was amazed by how quickly he had been notified, how quick was the linkup between Boulder and the Big Apple. It was disquieting. It was having something that goes around, come around. The security network's circulars and bulletins were no longer about happenings somewhere 'out there'. Events had caught up with him.

He could not believe it, and said so, when investigators presented the medical examiner's photograph. Yes, he was sure. He identified it conclusively. He had not seen her for a time, but it was definitely she.

Meanwhile, Josh's closest colleague had downloaded everything related to the Art Guerillas, printed it, photocopied it, and passed it discreetly to him. He thanked her.

He took leave the rest of the afternoon. He needed to sort things out. He needed time to think through his next move, now that the photo of Feta had been identified.

It happened that Feta was his cousin, his mother's sister's daughter, a bright student at CU in Boulder. Josh remembered her as a leggy girl who took after-school lessons in gymnastics and ballet and who liked to draw. 'Feta?' No, Messalina, who was majoring in art history, with a minor in communications. And now she was dead, killed in a crash at nineteen.

26.

"Just take me along, when you slide on down."

– Steely Dan, *Hey Nineteen*

The warehouse vibrated with a bass-and-drum throb, the nervously orgiastic energy of techno-pop. Revelers. Flashing lights. A simulation of tribal rite.

Repelled yet attracted, Veronica shot back absently: "What?"

"I always wondered why anyone would name their daughter that."

"Wondered what?"

"The name..." Josh yelled into Veronica's ear.

"What name?"

"Messalina. A recipe for knee-jerk rebellion."

"Why?"

"Precedence."

"What?"

"Precedence."

"I can't hear you!"

"\_\_\_\_!" Josh said something more, but it went missing. Lost in the pulse.

Veronica was in pharmaceutical ecstasy, her perceptions morphing. Josh could see that her thoughts were sliding, and that for the next two hours, maybe three, she would be able only to see the dancers and the lights.

She was becoming an undulous sway of curves and languorous lines, like slowly rising fire, her sleek arms held high in the desire of flailing flames washing over Josh and the rush of his categorical thoughts, whatever remnants remained of the old Cartesian split, so much flotsam and jetsam in the silence of sound, the space within the insistent throb, the place where the body itself is élan vitale, its own rationale. So just. So just let it go. Let it go down. So just let it go down... and he, too, started to slide.

see the dancers in the light  
 right here, now  
 desperate dancers every night  
 now here, here now  
 subalterns that seek release  
 frantic, frenetic pace  
 in ecstasy and fractured mirror  
 frantic, frenetic pace  
 midtown bots on work release  
 now here, here now  
 desperate dancers every night  
 right here, now  
 see the dancers in the light

When the raid came after midnight, the rave became an absurd theater in the round. Almost everyone got away, including Veronica and Josh. In that morning's edition, the story was on page three, with a captioned photo, so the whole thing was orchestrated. The

raid, probably underwritten by Pfizer-Sandoz, enhanced the technobots' illusion of edgy freedom. It was an exercise, Josh felt, a drill, a reason to live for the bots and the cops, those participating inmates from different wards of the same asylum. The thought was numbing, a pathway to abulia. Surely it would end there, if he failed to jump, to make a move. All he knew was that he could not keep doing what he was doing, living the comfortable lie of an acceptable contradiction. He could not, he would not work at an institution he was undermining, even if only in gesture and jest.

All right, then, he told himself. Decision made. Today is the first day of the rest of your strife. So be it. Let it rip. Bring it on.

But not yet, not at this moment. It was a quiet moment. Josh and Veronica had fled the warehouse to find a coffee nook. In fact, it was called *Coffee Nook*, and there they were, sitting in a corner nook. He told her of his decision to leave the Putney. There were several reasons, but, most immediately, the on-going investigation and the news about his cousin were pushing him over the line. He said nothing of his perception of the rave.

She listened attentively, nodding, saying little.

They sat in silence for a time. He sipped her mocha, she sipped his cappuccino, which deposited a slender moustache, the barest whisper, on her upper lip.

He laughed, but she did not. She dabbed with a paper napkin. Then she said that if he was making a big move, she, too, would make an overdue change.

"You mean... you mean you're going to quit painting?" he asked.

"I don't know. Commissions, for sure. No more of that."

"Ah. No more Picassos, Monets, and Chagalls."

"The list is longer than that, I'm afraid."

"I know. But the big question is, are you dropping out of our project?"

"No, I'll do the Van Meegeren for you. I promise. It's nearly done, anyway."

"So's the one in Basel."

"Yes, the one in Basel. So, why don't I know who the painter is?"

"The painter. You really have to know? Okay. But we would no longer be..."

"Like terrorist cells?"

"Hey. Besides, you're not in competition with him, nor is he with you. Right? But, if you really need to know..."

She took another sip of his cappuccino and shook her head, no. Then she said evenly: "What'll I do? I'm scared. A little. What am I going to do?"

"Yeah, so am I. So is everybody, probably. But really, *what* are you going to do? I wouldn't loose much sleep over it."

"Oh, you wouldn't. You mean it's not a problem, then."

"Not a desperate problem, no. More like an inconvenience."

"And how's that?"

"You could *model*, for one. Probably start next week."

"Why would I want to be a model?"

Josh chortled. He shook his head in consternation. "Sometimes you amaze me. I mean, look at you. You've got it. You really do. Most models don't. They're an illusion. Makeup, lighting, camera angles. But you, no. You've got it."

"I know I've got it?"

"No. I said: 'But you, no.' As in, *not you*. Then I said: 'You've got it.'"

"And so?"

"Well, two or three good years and you'd be set for life – if you can do what most of them can't."

"What's that?"

"Scale down. Learn to fly passenger class. Stay away from coke."

"But I don't do coke. Maybe a little E now and again, thanks to you. That aside, I *do* scale down."

"For now. I mean later."

"I think it wouldn't be a problem."

"I think that's easier said than done. Believe me."

"Whatever." Veronica thought a moment. "Fine. So just suppose I were to do what you are suggesting."

"Okay, I'm just supposing."

"How would I break in? I don't know anybody."

"You do. You have clients. That means you have connections. And you know me."

"Know you?"

"That's right."

"This conversation is crazy."

"All right, it's crazy. But think about it."

"There's nothing to think about."

"Yes, there is."

"What then?"

Josh paused to gather his thoughts. "I think I'm digging a hole for myself."

He took a deep breath. "All right, here goes. It sounds stupid at best, cloying at worst, to say that you're beautiful, because it's obvious. It's just a fact. Like a rose is a fact – no more, no less. Now, how it is that you remain oblivious of that fact sure beats the hell out of me."

"Got it. I'm beautiful but oblivious, so I should be a model? If A, then B..."

"It's an option. I'm talking about what you could be doing."

"I could exploit myself."

"Huh?" Not quite in exasperation, Josh replied: "Why be perverse about it? A rose isn't at fault because people find it beautiful and are willing to pay for it."

"But a rose doesn't voluntarily clip itself and go to market, either."

"It would, if it could. Maybe."

Veronica shook her head. "This conversation is crazy."

"All right, it's crazy. But think about it."

"There's nothing to think about."

"Yes, there is."

"You already said that."

"*So did you!*" – but Josh did not say that, he only thought it. Instead he said: "Did you have a good time last night?"

She tilted her head. "Oh, that. Yeah, I always like running from the cops."

"Me, too. We'll have to do it again, one day or another."

## 26.

"One day or another...after some trial and error, I think I found my final formula."

– Lautréamont, *Les chants de maldoror*

---

The formula varied from source to source, and it was sheer, although informed, speculation as to whether the court painter used the resin at all. Rembrandt did, in minute amounts, but Velásquez? After much trial and error, Anthony Morrow decided it didn't matter, because the original varnish might have been removed along the way, by some hack restorer. It happened all the time. Collectors changed signatures on paintings, or added fig leaves for the sake of modesty, or repainted damaged areas when they did not hire someone to do it. A painting that had traveled through time could easily have been restored a number of times, with varying degrees of success or damage. So he asked Hans and/or Pieter for a bottle of old varnish, something from the period of the Second World War, when the Nazis were amassing their private collections.

They had come to a business arrangement, not that the twins and Morrow trusted each other after two months of his working upstairs. It was simply that their interests coincided. For Morrow, it was a matter of expedience.

It happened this way. Having no connections, he decided to take the risk of letting them in. After all, they had supplied him with an old canvas to efface and paint over, so they already knew that he had something in the works. When time passed without their asking or saying anything further, he took that for discretion. Of course, he said nothing about Alex's project, the Meegeren Vermeer. He told them about *his* project, on which he worked mostly at night, up in the attic of Bilderberg's manse.

"Very ambitious," said the art and antiques dealer. "Very ambitious. You must realize, certainly, that the chance of success is not great."

"Yeah, I know. But can you help me?"

"Well..." The dealer was calculating probability, probably, and a cost-benefit equation in terms of the risk involved.

Morrow waited quietly. His cards were on the table and his thoughts were racing. Maybe, before answering, the dealer needed time to review statutes, to ascertain how old he would be upon release from prison. Maybe he needed first to check interest rates and service fees, to determine which bank with numbered accounts was the place for hiding money.

Anthony Morrow had not been long in Basel, but he already knew that the Swiss were skilled at concealing various things, especially how rich they might be.

He had discovered certain anomalies. For example, one of the districts in Basel was Riehen, which had the wealthiest citizens and the lowest taxes. Then there were all those three-storey affairs, outwardly quaint and homey looking, but actually commercial premises. At ground level one saw a patisserie, restaurant, or shop, while upstairs were foundations, trusts, and consultancies. Alex said the consultancies provided addresses for partnerships and corporations that were in actuality located hundreds, even thousands of miles afield. Alex also taught him a little history. After the war, in 1946, the government of Zug fitted that canton with a new system of taxation, one of the lowest to be found anywhere in the world; so that, by and by, Zug became home to thousands of incorporated

concerns – in fact, ten times as many businesses as citizens. But one would never know it, seeing all those sheep on the nearby hills.

Numbered accounts, chocolate, art stored in bunkers, yodeling, pharmaceuticals and cuckoo clocks (which were really from the Black Forest). That's how Morrow saw quietly reserved Switzerland. As he waited, he, too, affected the quiet reserve of the art and antiques dealer, who finally spoke:

"All right. When Pieter returns, I will speak with him. I think he will agree."

When Pieter returns? How absurd. After two months, Morrow knew that when he was speaking with Pieter, he was also speaking with Hans. The 'twins' were just one person, so why play an absurd game? Worse, a silly game, especially when the dealer's eyeglasses changed frames with either persona.

Fortunately, working with Alex Kumor Ambrose was straightforward. Morrow's only complaint went to the research assistant's conception of how to paint the *Marriage at Cana*. "I want you to paint it the way I would paint it, if only I could." That's what he told Morrow, going in. He had reasons for wanting the "Meegeren Vermeer" done exactly as shown in his awkwardly drawn schematic. To begin, the painter in New York had the same schematic and was working to the same scale, using the same materials, so that two very similar paintings would be produced. Only choices in coloration would differ. Each painter could arrange the colors in their versions as they saw fit, so long as those colors agreed with the colors Meegeren employed to knock off the Master of Delft. Alex had researched Meegeren's colors carefully, just as he knew Meegeren's techniques for aging his canvases. The schematic, said Alex, arranged the elements Meegeren would have included in the picture, as he would have placed them.

The project, Alex explained, had started as a joke with implications. Josh came across a quote about curators being 'painters' when they mounted exhibitions; and he, Alex, had suggested that someone should take Seth Siegelau literally. Then Josh mentioned Marcel Duchamp having painted two versions of *Nude Descending A Staircase*, copying himself, and that led to talk about forging oneself à la Giorgio di Chirico – and then they went off on the criteria of evaluation and the practices of marketing, one thing leading to another – and the rest is, well, history. Or it might prove to be.

Morrow had no problem with that. Nor did he care about the implications of the project. In a way, he just wanted to make rent – not that he was, after thumbing through Rorem's *Paris Diaries*, philosophically averse to being a house guest. A problem arose when Alex suggested that vermilion be pushed toward orange in the highlights, or that verditer appeared too green in the shadows. That's when Morrow handed him a palette knife and said: "Here, you mix the colors."

Veronica Cardui, by way of contrast, had taken an immediate interest in the ideas informing Josh's collaboration. The project amused her. Unlike Anna Lorraine Noailles, Josh never once looked over Veronica's shoulder, so doing the faux Meegeren was like being on holiday after the humid, hothouse orchid undercurrent of doing Anna's portrait in the manner of Luis Fernandez. In the end, Anna seemed pleased with the result, and she intimated that she would have something more, soon.

*Ten Lizz* made that remark shortly after being introduced to Veronica's roommate from Bard College. Grace was there, too. She had come to collect a fanciful Chagall that Veronica had promised to do for her, a companion piece to the violin-playing goat, the one

that Hugh Grant receives from Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill*. She requested it in lieu of the ten percent commission she usually received as Veronica's agent. It was finished, finally, as Anna's portrait was finally finished.

Finished, finished, finished. The time had come, for Veronica. She filled three flutes, composed herself upon a stool and waited for an opening, while the two women chatted, pleasantly exchanging personal trivia, discussing the paintings, and sipping Spanish champagne.

Grace turned to her to say that she was negotiating a new commission and expected to firm it up by Friday. It was for a large Monet, said Grace, turning again to Anna. The client knew and admired Veronica's work. How nice.

Veronica refrained from laughing. The Valley Girl-speak had gone missing. Grace likely would have said, "It's like *so* in the bag" were Anna not present, but she adapted and said that the commission was assured. That is when Anna remarked that she herself would have something soon, and she gave Grace her calling card.

Veronica had found her opening, not the best of openings, but it would have to do. She told Grace that it was just as well the commission was still in negotiation, because she would no longer accept commissions to do copies. She was hanging up her mahl stick.

Pffft. The attempt at levity went flat and for nothing.

Grace said: "Oh? That's a surprise."

Anna said: "I don't know what to say. Are you quitting? Have you thought about this? How long?"

Veronica nodded. "Yes and no. It's been coming for some time. I need to be doing my own work."

Anna squinted at Veronica, as if to see more clearly, then nodded to the painting on the easel, hidden from view, draped with a cloth. "Is that your own work?"

Interesting question, thought Veronica. The painting on the easel was something of a magnum opus, although it measured only 87 by 71 centimeters. Still unfinished, it was the most difficult thing she had ever attempted. Lately she was seeing it as the culmination of all her gone-astray efforts.

At last she replied: "Yes. I suppose it is."

"You suppose it is." Anna was assessing her. "May I see it?"

"If you like, when it's finished. If I finish it."

"Meaning, if you *never* finish it, we shall never have the chance to see it, will we. And that would be a pity. Don't you agree, Grace?"

Anna was pushing. Imposed upon, Grace nodded, so Veronica caved. "Okay, why not. I'll never finish it, anyway. Probably throw it out."

"Tsk. Why so negative?! We still have yet to see it, this newest masterpiece," rejoined Anna.

They moved over to the easel, gathered around it, and Veronica gingerly lifted the cloth that protected the surface of the painting from airborne dust.

It was an equestrian portrait. More accurately, it appeared to be a preliminary study for an equestrian portrait.

"Why, that's Philip IV, isn't it?" exclaimed Anna Lorraine Noailles.

"It's supposed to be," said Veronica. "It's supposed to be *His Majesty on Horse*."

"But I know something about Velázquez. That's his style, isn't it? He was the court painter. Well. *His Majesty on Horse*, you say. I've been to the Prado, several times, but I do not recall this particular painting."

"Who's it for?" asked Grace.

"No one," answered Veronica. "It's just... something I decided to do. Why, I don't know. I can't say."

"It's magnificent," said Anna quietly. "But... but what is the source?"

Veronica explained about the missing painting that she happened to discover in an old catalogue raisonné.

"Oh, I see," said Anna Noailles. "I think I understand. No one knows what the original looks like, because it has been lost."

"Since the Napoléonic Wars," added Veronica. "According to the catalogue."

Anna was smiling broadly now, as if she were in on a private joke. "This isn't a copy, then."

"No," Veronica allowed. "It's not a copy."

To Veronica's surprise, Grace asked the pertinent question. "Hmm," she began. "If it's not a copy, then what is it? An original? You know, in a way?"

There was no need for Veronica to answer, because Anna immediately fielded the question: "Yes, yes, most definitely, I should say, although the style belongs to Velásquez. Oh, I think I understand. Today, one might call it a forgery, no?"

Veronica said: "Depends how it's presented. Suppose I am studying Velásquez. Better yet, suppose that I worked in his studio and learned his style directly from him. Then what? Paintings done by Rembrandt's assistants, even by his students, have been attributed to their master. So they are masterpieces, Rembrandts, until proved otherwise. Then, market value plunges, and they are no longer important paintings. They become curiosities, I suppose. Art historical footnotes."

Anna laughed. "You're perverse! *Certainment*, this is an historical curiosity – but who knows, maybe it deserves to be, what did you say, an art historical footnote! Tell me, what do you intend to do with it?"

Veronica shook her head. "I don't know anymore. I guess, at first... oh hell, I don't know what to say. Not really. I started it when I was very angry. That's all. I won't finish it. Not now. So I guess I don't intend anything for it."

Anna looked at the painting intently. Suddenly, she said: "You thought to place it at auction, am I right? Ah. I see. Does your curator boyfriend know?"

Veronica felt naked chagrin. Anna's tone had an edge that was cutting. In the bat of an eye, the convivial atmosphere became stark and somber. Almost airless.

"Not that it matters," said Anna, matter of factly. "I'd like to buy it."

"I intend to throw it away."

"Then you *do* have an intention, but don't let's be silly. It's too good a painting and I must have it. I will not accept refusal, seeing that you will throw it away. I can write a check."

"No, really. I..."

"I said, I will not accept your refusal."

She opened her purse, removed a leather checkbook and a black fountain pen. She bent over the taboret and wrote the draft upon Veronica's clean plateglass palette. She tore the check away, forcibly, and left it there.

"I will send my driver up to collect the painting. I can manage one at a time, and for now, that's the portrait." She smiled. "Please tell Giles, if this check is insufficient. I will send the balance by post."

That was that. Veronica was speechless. Anna Noailles had never before been so imperious. And before Veronica could gather her wits, Grace said:



"Thanks for the Chagall. I like this other one, too." Grace was pensive, her face clouded. "I guess we're no longer partners, are we?" Stiffly, she pecked Veronica on the cheek. "I've got to run. See you, when I see you?"

Veronica managed to nod.

Following Anna's lead, Grace gathered her painting and found the door.

The door of the bed chamber was ajar. Something was amiss. Alex had never been in the old man's room; he had not been given the key. He proceeded cautiously.

"Dr. Bilderberg?" He waited a moment, then called again: "Dr. Bilderberg?"

There was no reply.

Apparently, the old man had gone out. But where, and why had he said nothing? That was highly unusual. Come to think of it, the old man had not assigned Alex anything to do for the past three days. That, too, was highly unusual, and here the door was open.

Something was awry. Perhaps the old man had slept badly again, and this morning went to his favorite café. Perhaps he was up on the hill, at the university. An appointment to cut his hair? More likely, an appointment to see his broker or his lawyer. Yes, now that he thought on it, Alex was sure that Bilderberg was unlikely to say anything about meeting an attorney or adding another codicil to his will. Whatever the case, fortune was smiling. With no skills as a cutpurse or picklock, Alex for weeks had been toying with various ruses to steal into the chamber – but today, the best plan was no plan. Bilderberg had gone out without closing the door.

He tiptoed into the room. Had he seen himself in the cheval glass, he would have laughed. Here he was, home alone, obliged to tiptoe. But he was too concentrated on his purpose to have a sense of the ridiculous. There were three walnut chests against the wall that demanded his full attention, two with shallow rollout drawers of the type used to store blueprints and drawings, while the third chest had two parallel columns of four drawers, smaller but deeper. He felt a giddy lump in his throat. The end of the rainbow! There, in one of the drawers, Alex would surely find what vexed him. There, too, in one of those drawers, he might find the means to his revenge.

He was not, he well knew, the only person who would welcome a chance to search these drawers. As the professor's assistant, Alex handled much of his correspondence. He typed nearly everything that Bilderberg signed, and, in certain circumstances, he himself wrote the drafts of Bilderberg's replies. This is how he came to know that the University was interested in the disposition of Bilderberg's estate, specifically his notes and papers. Alex was alarmed, for the old boy's reply was not entirely discouraging of the university's inquiry. So what of the foundation? Then there were museums interested in the eclectic collection of drawings and prints. While wearing white gloves, Alex had been permitted to peruse these himself, when he first assumed his duties. But not since. The collection was extensive and valuable. There were drawings by Klimt and Klee and an illustration by Masson, a pen and ink study by Vassari (possibly of Michelangelo), several etchings by Rembrandt (not restrikes, Alex had been assured), and woodcuts by Altdorfer and Duerer. Although there was a superb mixed media drawing of the Duke of Northumberland done by Hans Holbein, the *pièce de réputée*, in the old scholar's eyes, was a delicately colored portrait in chalk, a young woman of the Spanish court, from the hand of Antonio Moro.

That was all he could recall, having seen the collection but once. Anyway, it was Bilderberg's responses to different institutions, along with his subtly implied promises to now-estranged grand-nephews, that turned Alex's alarm to dispiritedness. As that passed, he might easily have become incensed, had he not adopted a classic motto: Don't get mad, get even.

Alex tried one of several drawers with locks, to see if his luck would hold, but of course it was secure. Where was the key? It had to be in the room, somewhere. So, if he were a key, he nearly said aloud, where would he hide? He tried first the *amoire*, tall and graceful. There was nothing inside the double doors, and nothing in the corner of either of

its drawers. He even felt inside the pockets of a monogrammed bathrobe, a matching pair of slippers, and four pairs of well-polished wingtips. Nothing.

Wait a minute. He looked behind the first chest of drawers. Nothing. The second chest, which was in the middle, would surely hide nothing, because the old boy would have to push and pull it, in and out, every time he wanted the key. When he looked behind the third chest, there it was. Small. Brass. Hanging from the wall. All the drawers took this same key, and for that, Alex chuckled. If only that were the case with fallen angels – a single Enochian key.

Most of the shallow drawers were empty, others had blank sheets of divers paper stocks. There were two Dalí prints in one drawer, but Alex knew better. The artist had signed all those blank sheets. Hundreds, if not thousands. Why? A surrealist gesture? There was a time Alex wondered about it, but not any more.

He was looking for two things. First priority went to finding a copy of Bilderberg's will, although that was likely kept in some safe-deposit box or lodged with a lawyer. But there just might be, he hoped, a third original copy in these drawers. Next in priority was the embossed letterhead that Bilderberg used for official correspondence and, more to the matter at hand, for sending his opinions, appraisals, and authentications into the world. In three years as an assistant, Alex had typed upon it only twice. There was a plain letterhead used in reply to readers, collectors, universities and the like. With the embossed letterhead, Alex might proceed. In these culminating moments, the special letterhead was his project's *sine qua non*. After all, for the past six months, he had been practicing his mentor's rapier signature: *RM von Bild\_b\_g*. It was tricky. The scholar's hand was barely legible, as is so often the case with the greatest of men.

It came as no surprise that Alex did not find the will. Perhaps its absence explained why Dr. B was out for the morning. As for the letterhead, the foolscap in a neat stack in a lower drawer, he took – no, he appropriated, or rather claimed – half a dozen sheets. Why, because a former Scout should be prepared for every contingency. His nerve might fail and his hand could tremble. He might botch Bilderberg's rapier-slash signature. His fountain pen might leak.

So be prepared. Experience shows. Sometimes smiling fortune is a magic lantern show produced and directed by the trickster gods. By mid-afternoon, this fortuitous day proved to be a case in point, as Alex would soon come to find out.

It happened this way.

Alex's surmise that the old man had slept badly was correct. Morrow would have called it 'spot on'. Bilderberg had not slept at all. In fact, he had not even gone to bed. Instead, he shuffled back and forth in his bedchamber. He sat down at his small writing desk, then rose again to shuffle back and forth. Not that he was distraught, or that he had insomnia. He was thinking, composing in his head. There were important matters, on his mind for some time, that he wished to dispose and dispense. Beyond that, he also wanted to make himself as overly tired as possible.

There was method in this. He had always faced facts. He had always been a man of firm resolve, at least until recently. Recently, food had lost its taste. His eyes were no longer keen. When he stood, or sat, or laid down in whatever position, something itched, or twitched, or ached. Usually all three, because he was an old man of eighty-nine, but he refused to complain. Still, his friends were gone, his sister was dead, and, worst of all, his prestige was waning. In one instance, it had passed. True, his life of Velásquez was in print, and the catalogue raisonné was often cited. But next Spring, his *History of Art*

would not be republished, after twenty-three editions. It made no difference, he supposed. Certainly it did not matter from a financial standpoint, because he received no royalties from the book, having been paid a prince's ransom at the time of its first publication.

Ah, well. Here he was, with colleagues gone, no friends, and no immediate family. Only his sister's grandchildren, who never come to call. Just a research assistant and a house guest, who, admittedly, he had not bothered to meet. It was happenstance, really. The old man had been feeling under the weather, especially the day following the Fulbright scholar's arrival. After that, the lad was always somewhere else. Magic name, indeed. That was Alex for you. True, it seemed like synchronicity, to an old reader of Carl Jung. Ha! Imagine, finding his long-lost monograph on Mor at the same time. What a strange world it is. Who knows? Maybe up on the hill there has been gossip about Alex and the new lodger. Fine and dandy. There certainly had been no gossip, at all, of the Georgia O'Keefe-Juan Hamilton type, surrounding the old connoisseur and his personal assistant. Utterly inequitable, he thought, that a crone can raise eyebrows, while a codger remains an object of ridicule.

In the wee hours, he had stopped pacing. He had found the words, the right tone he wished to convey, so he sat down to commit them to paper. When he had finished, he placed the handwritten letter atop official documents, signed and sealed in the previous three days – then he surmounted all with a paperweight.

From the bathroom medicine chest, he removed a bottle of pills, which he placed on his night stand. He opened the small cabinet in the base of the stand, reached in, and retrieved a bottle of *The Glenrothes* (1985), with its fruity notes and tannic dryness. He set that, too, on the stand and he chuckled. Some enjoyed it with Aberdeen beef.

In a corner of his room stood his favorite wingback chair. He sat down, turned low the lamp alongside, and arranged himself. He was comfortable. Everything was in order.

He attended his breath, breathing deeply in and out. His mind began to wander. Without rancor or regret, he recalled the old days, when his world was young. A sense of peace descended over him. It was almost blissful. But then he became aware that a sense of peace had descended upon him, sitting there, everything in order, with his decision made.

Now what? Sunlight, that's what. He slowly realized that light was gathering in the room. Of course, the sun was rising. A new day.

He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, brush his thin hair, and otherwise make himself presentable. He dressed carefully. He was going out. Where? To the café at the SBB station. Why not. He had not been to the café in a month or more. He needed some coffee, maybe a croissant, maybe a newspaper, maybe a nice smile from the pleasant waitress who worked there. As for the rest, it would keep. He could just as well make his exit that evening, instead, when he would be completely spent.

Dr. von Bilderberg arrived at the the SBB Station shortly before seven o'clock. When he entered the small, clean café, he saw the familiar coats of arms on the wall above a shelf of cups overturned on saucers. There was something new, in the midst of the plaques: a cuckoo clock. A lone customer, sitting on a red stool, was reflected in the mirror behind the white counter.

In the mirror, the old scholar saw an elderly gentleman with blotched skin and thin, silver hair which was revealed when he removed his gray Homburg. Under the ceiling light, his squinting eyes were cast in shadow. A nose straight from Rembrandt hung between eyebrows that might have met in the middle had they not been clumsily trimmed.

His mouth turned wearily down at the corners, with deep furrows on either side. Who was this gentleman? A retired professor? A retired judge? A weary old man, surely.

He shuffled over to a small corner table, placed his hat upon it, and settled down onto the overstuffed seat. The table, his favorite, was where he wished to rest for a time. What should he order? To begin, cappuccino and two croissants with peach compote and butter. He closed his eyes a moment, trying to recall what came with the American breakfast set. Two eggs, two strips of bacon, and...

The young waitress, the one he had come to see, appeared from the kitchen. She was carrying a tray of pastries, which she placed inside the glass display to the side of the counter. She saw the professor. Collecting her pencil and order pad, she hurried to his table.

"Es tut mir leid, dass Sie warten mussten, Herr Professor. Darf ich Ihre Bestellung aufnehmen?"

The old man did not respond, and there was no longer any reason for the waitress to apologize for having kept him waiting.

"Herr Professor?" Gently, she shook his shoulder. "Herr Professor!"

A team of paramedics arrived in minutes. When resuscitation failed, police were called, and the medical examiner, who years earlier had attended an elective course of Bilderberg's lectures, set the time of death. The examiner notified the university, later in the morning. In the afternoon, the secretary of the Fine Arts Department tried several times to telephone the emeritus professor's assistant.

As it happened, Alex was leaving the old man's bedchamber about half an hour after he died. Alex had returned the key to its hook on the wall behind the third chest of drawers, and, as he was drawing closed the door, he noticed the bottle of single malt on the old man's nightstand. Odd, he thought, for it meant that Dr. B must have gone upstairs to the library. Then Alex saw the bottle of pills. He re-entered the room and looked around more carefully.

His eyes settled upon the small writing desk and the stack of neatly arranged papers. Under the paperweight, he found a letter and three documents, which he scanned rapidly. Oh, god – a codicil to the will. And, what's this? Alex could not believe it. There were two signed authentications. The one certifying *Marriage at Cana* stated that the painting had been part of Dr. von Bilderberg's private collection since 1945, and that he had acquired it at the time of the trial of Han van Meegeren. Amazing.

Then there was the other authentication. Stupefied, Alex read it twice. He did not understand, at all, because that certificate of authenticity read as follows:

**Diego Velázquez (1599–1660)**

*His Majesty On Horse* (Bilderberg No. 342)

Description: oil on linen.

Dimensions: 87cm x 71cm.

Provenance:

Phillip IV, King of Spain

Napoléon I, Emperor of France, ca. 1808

Michel Ney, Duke of Elchingen, ca. 1808-9

Assumed lost.

There were incidental remarks to the effect that *His Majesty on Horse* had been in private hands, a family of Belgian bankers that perished at Buchenwald, from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the masterpiece was confiscated by the Nazis.

Alex still failed to understand, but then it occurred to him that the letter, folded carefully into thirds, might contain some further explanation. Unfolding it, he read:

*Alexander,*

*I regret the inconvenience my departure may cause you. Although you should find everything in order, please inquire of my attorney, Mr. Gerard Roux-Norman, Esq. if you have any question.*

*I regret, also, that I will be unable to keep my promise to you of a directorship. I suspect there will be no foundation, at all, and that this house will go for taxes. You deserve an explanation, and I will give it now, as best I can.*

*The truth is, for some time I have been in arrears. Real difficulties began when Mr. Soros raided the Asian economy two years ago. At that time I was trading heavily in Australian Dollars, Euros, Thai Baht and Japanese Yen. Alas, for me. In every game, there are winners and losers. Unfortunately, I was holding Baht when Soros made his move.*

*There it is. Am I right in assuming that you already are apprised of this? I think so, but whatever is the case, please do not debit our relationship. To the extent that I have detained you here under false pretenses, I hope that the provisions of a new codicil will not be unwelcome, however modest. Believe me, I would do more had I the means.*

*Please convey my sincerest apology to Mr. Morrow, for not having made his acquaintance. I trust he has used his time here to good advantage? To whatever purpose, please make use of the pertinent documents left with this note. Perhaps I owe an explanation for these, as well. I count it a blessing that, after a long life, I am able to have a final say on Velásquez. And such an important painting, into the bargain! At the same time, I have followed with great interest your efforts to enhance Mr. van Meegeren's oeuvre. He has been much on my mind of late. You surely know the reason why. Meegeren is the reason we remember Dr. Bredius, is he not, even as I am thinking of him now. Consider, then, this gesture as a form of overdue penance. If it helps advance your current endeavor, all the better. There is no need for bewilderment. You have oft helped me. In those matters that matter most, you have been a reliable assistant.*

*By the way, you will find a revised draft of the monograph on Anthonis Mor between the mattresses of my bed. Do what you will with it.*

*My best to you, always. Burn this note.*

*B.*

"Above all, never have the four friends do anything until it has first been recounted."  
 – Marquis de Sade, note for *The 120 Days of Sodom*

---

When Veronica Cardui came away from the bank upon which Anna Noailles had drafted the generous check for purchase of *His Majesty on Horse*, she would have taken, even welcomed, anything in exchange for it. First a teller, then an officer told her that the account was closed. And, it was more than a year since checks had changed format.

It was a make-or-break day. While Veronica was gone to the bank, Josh Melrose submitted his resignation to the administration of the Putney Museum. As he departed, a colleague drew him aside to wish him well, but also to tell him that everyone's e-mail had been monitored for months. It was her assignment to liaison with security services, but she liked Josh. "Watch your back," she said. "And the sides."

Upon his return to the apartment, Veronica was still out. That did not help. He felt all sixes and sevens. He heated water for coffee, paced about, and stared out the window down to the street. He fingered the leaves of her African violet, then the bristles of her brushes sticking up from a vase, and finally the spines of a stack of books that he had lent her. He wandered into her bathroom to wash his face and assessed it in the mirror. For a moment, he did not know the guy. Buck up, he told himself. It will all work out.

When he heard the pot come to a boil, he returned to the kitchenette. Was it to be New England Roast or Hazelnut? Decisions, decisions.

With coffee made, he went into the bedroom and set the mug upon the makeshift stand by her bed. Near the phone was a black sketchbook, for Veronica was disciplined and set down ideas as soon as they came to her. But, it was not a sketchbook.

It happened to be her diary and, at first, Josh balked. He knew he ought not to read it, but then he was curious to know what Veronica had written about him. Maybe she had mentioned his – what? – sensitivity as a lover.

Maybe not. It came as only a mild surprise that Veronica, instead, had something to say about Anna Noailles's predilections, for she had experimented with her lesbian patron. It was a guarded account. The affair with Anna, if one could call it that, did not last long. It ran its course around the time that Veronica first met him at Cipriani's. Apparently, problems surfaced early. Anna, wrote Veronica, had sadistic tendencies; worse, she was possessive, far too possessive, even to the point of unremitting jealousy.

Josh felt a twinge from the green-eyed monster, though he was sure that Veronica was not at all bisexual. He understood the need to challenge bourgeois values – a rite of passage, the overcoming of taboos – but still he felt the twinge. Maybe more than a little. Why? Did that mean he was in love? What would that mean? No one he knew seemed to know what the word meant. Was he in love? Maybe not.

He put the question out of mind. He scanned the careful penmanship, looking for his name. Gradually, it appeared more frequently, until his name became the center of her narrative. What did she say? He could not say, because he decided not to read what she had written. A kind of trade-off. His curiosity had already violated her privacy, at a time when he needed her trust. Well, he was human, after all, and humans do these things. He closed the book and ran his hand over the cover, then returned it to its place.

When she finally returned, Veronica was shaking her head. She was smiling, too, if a grim smile may be called a smile. He watched her toss her purse onto the table, remove her shoes, and flop down upon the divan.

"So?" he said.

She shook her head again. "So."

When Veronica told him that Anna's check was a draft upon a closed account, Josh said nothing. He was still conscious of having violated her privacy. His thoughts were racing, competing, because a check had bounced and he had read the diary, all that Veronica had written about Anna Lorraine Noailles. The affair, yes. But the diary also set forth personal data, background, in scattered places that he was trying to fit together. Then it clicked. *Eyes Wide Shut*. When they saw the film, Veronica had asked whether Anna might have seen it. And that made him recall something else.

"Hey," he began cautiously. "Didn't you wonder about *Eyes Wide Shut* – whether Anna might have seen it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The masked ball. Remember? Didn't she invite you to a masked ball?"

"Oh, that. Why are you thinking of that, now?"

He began to pace back and forth. "Because it's making me think of something else. I mean, didn't you also say something about her grandmother?"

"Yes, probably, of course. Marie-Laure de Noailles."

"And her grandfather. He was... who?"

"Oh, you mean that her grandfather wasn't Charles?"

"Yeah. That's it."

"So?"

"So who was her grandfather? Didn't you say something like the Count de Saint-Germain?"

He had read the name in her diary, an entry in the beginning, from the time when Veronica was greatly impressed with Anna's pedigree. Otherwise, Veronica had never mentioned Anna's grandfather – at least not to him – but she supposed wrongly: "Yes, I suppose I did. The Count Saint-Germain. Why?"

Josh pulled a volume from the stack of books that he had lent Veronica. "I think you've not read this. Not yet."

"Read what?"

"This," said Josh, holding up *Foucault's Pendulum*.

Veronica shook her head. "I'm not all that interested in science. Too dry. And what's it got to do with Anna's check?"

"*Foucault's Pendulum*," continued Josh, ignoring the last question. "It's widely read, in some circles. But it's not science. It's about conspiracy. You know, the usual suspects: Templars, Freemasons, Illuminati, Kaballists, and their editors and a publisher. Everyone's obsessed, one way or another. The Western tradition. It's a good read."

"So what, it's a good read. What's wrong with you?"

"Be patient," he said patiently. "I think the Count's in here."

"In there?"

He nodded. Josh searched through the book. At length, he exclaimed: "Ah! Got it. Here, in Chapter 27."

And so Veronica came to read the strange account of the Count Saint-Germain in *Foucault's Pendulum*. He had lived for many centuries. His valet claimed to have been in service to him 'only four hundred years'. Among the European courts at which he appeared before the French Revolution, the Count Saint-Germain had stayed at Versailles, as had the infamous Cagliostro. After the Revolution, the count disappeared and reappeared at great intervals.



Veronica was perplexed. "This says that in 1930, Saint-Germain was seen aboard an ocean liner. But Anna told me that Marie-Laure was with Saint-Germain very briefly. And she said nothing about an ocean liner."

Josh nodded. "Somewhere I read that the count was also seen around 1936, or maybe it was 1937. He was departing the port of Marseilles, I think it was, after a sojourn in the Midi. Something like that. The point is, I think Anna reads a lot."

"She does, but..."

"But what? Eyes wide shut?"

Josh telephoned the precinct police, who advised him to bring in the check and file a formal complaint.

That's how Josh and Veronica spent the late afternoon.

At the precinct, their complaint filed, they sat on a bench discussing Anna. While a staff sergeant was calling up data from a computer network, Veronica was telling Josh everything she knew.

"Anna told me that Marie-Laure was her grandmother. And her mother, who she said was Saint-Germain's daughter, was born in 1934. Or maybe it was 1936. I can't remember exactly. Anna said that her mother is dead and..."

Josh interrupted: "You say 1934, maybe 1936?"

Veronica nodded. "One of those. Doesn't matter, I can't remember her name."

"Hmm."

"But I can tell you this: Anna says that she, Anna herself, was conceived at the Woodstock Festival. That's priceless. What else? Her mother and father never married, so she was adopted. Her mother was Catholic, and abortions were harder to get back then. That's what her father wanted, and apparently that's why Anna's mother did not marry him. The adoption happened, I guess, because Anna's mother was a serious lefty. She took off for Chile, I think it was, and ended up dead in a jungle somewhere."

"That's pretty wild. Do you believe all that... I mean, now?"

"I don't know what to believe. She spoke of her grandmother all the time and about the artists that she knew. Cocteau, Picasso..."

"But the Count Saint-Germain?"

"Yeah, well," sighed Veronica. She looked at the certified photocopy of the check that she had been given in exchange for the original. "I don't know... I guess at least one thing's for certain. Her last name is Noailles."

Actually, it was not. While they were discussing Anna, data had been coming in. Momentarily, the staff sergeant informed them that Anna had been on their radar for some time. Of course, he said nothing about her alias. For now, said the sergeant, they had done everything that could be done. Not to worry, he said, the matter was in hand. If there were any developments, Veronica would be notified. Feel free, he said, to check back in a couple days.

From precinct headquarters, Josh and Veronica went to the studio where they had first made love, and where she was completing the Meegeren Vermeer. Josh wanted to use the computer there. Veronica turned her attention to the painting, while Josh went on-line.

Within fifteen minutes, he had found what he sought. He called Veronica to look at the monitor, which displayed a brief biography:

*Marie-Laure Bischoffsheim married Viscount Charles de Noailles in 1923. By most accounts, Charles was homosexual, but the marriage produced two daughters: Laure Madeleine Thérèse, and Nathalie Valentine Marie. Laure, the elder sister, died in 1979.*

"Now, this..." Josh brought up a previous webpage for Art Watch Security:

*Nathalie de Noailles is currently embroiled in a dispute over ownership of Sade's manuscript Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome, which Charles de Noailles had purchased for his wife, Marie-Laure, a direct descendant of the Marquis. The case is being decided in a Swiss court.*

Veronica whistled. "You know, nothing is conclusive of anything, is it?"

"Absolutely, you mean? No. But we're still learning. We're getting closer."

Veronica was impatient. The next morning she went to the precinct headquarters to make an inquiry. She was asked to sit down, while a clerk called up the information thus far retrieved. A printer came to life. Then Veronica was called to the desk and handed a summary, Re: Paine, Hannah. Alias: 'Anna Noailles'; 'Ann Noyes'.

The summary said that Hannah Paine, born in 1970, had been in and out of mental institutions. Current address unknown. Adoptive parents in Glen Cove, New York.

Then Veronica read *Remarks*: The father (name blacked out) was a former student radical (SDS), current address unknown. The mother (name blacked out) was a classically trained dancer and Maoist revolutionary who died in Bolivia. Date uncertain. Hannah's adoptive parents are Mr. and Mrs. K. Davis Paine. Paine is a financial consultant and the manager of a hedge fund.

Veronica was left to wonder. She asked about Hannah Paine's institutionalization: Why was she *not still* locked up in a loony bin?

In a monotone, the clerk explained that the legal standard in New York is whether the nutcase is a danger to others. Apparently, Hannah Paine had been judged not to be.

Then the clerk smiled. "But, hey. She passed a bad check. We'll get her."

It happened this way. The police never found her. When they met Mr. K. Davis Paine in his plush office, he said that he did not know her whereabouts. He said also that Hannah was well-provided. Admittedly, she was on a generous monthly stipend to stay away, more or less, because, in personal matters, he had given up on her. He could not reason with her, and she was constantly bickering with his wife. However, she had an apartment on the East side, a mobile phone, an ATM card, and a chauffeur who was at her disposal. In this way, Paine assured the detectives, he knew her whereabouts – although, at the moment, he could not say exactly where that might be.

Another thing never came out, something that was not germane to the case at hand, but something rather important to the dreamily inquisitive Hannah when she discovered it in her fourteenth year. Indeed, her adoptive parents were New Yorkers, but Mr. Paine's family was from Connecticut, of all places, and he had a paternal great-aunt who married into a Belgian banking family named Bischoffsheim.

"I would rather be first painter of coarse things than second in higher art."

– Diego Velázquez

---

The demise of Ranier Maria von Bilderberg had implications and repercussions. Days before the funeral, the deceased connoisseur's attorney was receiving expressions of sincere grief from museums, universities and private collectors who knew Dr. Bilderberg personally as well as professionally. He was a great man, they eulogized, and his passing was a great loss. Would it be indelicate, in this bereaved hour, to inquire of his estate?

The mundane world was descending. With the old man dead, Alex's project, his grand inside joke, was suddenly bereft of *raison-d'être*. His 'audience of one' was gone. The prank had been rendered pointless before the onset of serious play. A revenge play, at that. Worse, the professor had made a bid to collaborate, when he was supposed to be the butt of the joke. No matter how Alex looked at it, the rules had changed in the middle of the game. At best, a single move remained open to him, and – how he hated to admit it – the old man had provided that, too. But how to make the play?

That evening, when Morrow returned to the house on Mühletorgässlein, Alex was waiting. He told Morrow there was bad news, and there was good news, and he watched closely for Morrow's reaction as he informed him of the professor's passing; because the right reaction, Alex knew, meant the game could continue by playing a poisoned pawn.

Deflated, Morrow's demeanor drooped, because our painter had worked out a plan. Through Hans and Pieter Narren, Morrow intended to approach Bilderberg with a story of how the equestrian portrait had been found at an estate sale. This was plausible enough. Very often the heirs of an estate know not what they have. Such ignorance keeps many a dealer's doors open. But, Herr Professor Doktor would know. He was the expert's expert, and if they were able to finesse an opinion based on connoisseurship from him... well then, everything would be roses. And now? What a pity. *Qué dia tan triste en Basel*. The faux court painter's plan was busted, and it showed on his face.

Alex, if he was anything, was an astute observer. He read that face and he knew that the moment had come for a bold move, a calculated risk. He pushed his poison pawn to the center of the board. Point blank, he said: "Don't worry. The professor prepared an authentication. And, I have it."

Above all, Alex was a practical man, so he wanted fifty percent of the action in exchange for the document. Morrow was mortified – and irritated, much in the same way as Alex had been when he learned that the old man was ahead of him – but his instinct for survival was keen. He adapted quickly. "That must be the good news," he said flatly.

Naturally, negotiations began in earnest. Naturally, there were snags. Naturally, when Morrow called the Brothers Narren, they balked at the prospect of any reduction of their fifty percent. From their point of view, if the assistant took fifty percent, there would be nothing left for the painter. Naturally, Morrow took exception to that. Without the painting, he snapped, there would be nothing to take to market. He didn't care. The three little piggies could just stay home. Only he called them swine cunts.

Late that night, the four players came together. It was less than amicable. Entering the house, Hans shook Alex's hand perfunctorily. Pieter did not; instead he said: "So, what about the will?" They wanted to know what the lawyer was scheming.

The implication was not lost. That was when Morrow realized that Alex knew something he had not. And it was then he knew that the Brothers Narren had been playing him from the beginning, from the very moment they learned that Morrow was staying in their grand-uncle's house. As it happened, Alex knew that the brothers were Bilderberg's estranged grand-nephews – estranged because their grand-uncle had staked their business and never recouped his investment. Not one Swiss franc.

Morrow kept his head: "Everybody chill. We can work it out, if everybody just stays cool."

Alex made a sweeping gesture of welcome. "I think we need to coordinate," he said. He could not have chosen a less fortunate word. It took half an hour to set the will aside, and that only after Alex read the letter stating that the house would be sold for taxes. He said the lawyer was studying a new codicil and that the brothers, who were mentioned in it, could make an appointment for consultation any time they liked. Alex was buying time, and the lie seemed to appease them. But again, talk turned tense over the painting.

Finally, the heated haggling pushed Morrow into a last-ditch pitch: "I don't get you guys. Can't we just split the fucker four ways? Look, if this thing goes, there'll be plenty to pass around, so there's no point in anyone plotting a murder."

After a moment, Hans nodded perfunctorily. "All for one, one for all," he said.

Alex smiled sardonically, while Pieter Narren shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

It happened this way. When the uncanny simulacrum of *His Majesty on Horse*, backed by Bilderberg, made its rapid progress to the auction house in London, the world of the cognoscenti was serenaded by Crispin-Southy's discreet fanfare. To announce their offer of a true rarity, the auctioneers sent out an electronic card with tasteful floral border, together with a catalogue entry setting forth the following particulars:

**Diego Velázquez (1599–1660)**

*His Majesty On Horse* (B. 342)

Description: Equestrian portrait

Materials: oil on linen

Dimensions: 87cm x 71cm

Anon. sale, Crispin-Southy, 5 October 1999, No. 13

Acquisition: Bequeathed

Reference: A.1999.GR.1950

**Provenance:**

Philip IV, King of Spain

Napoléon I, Emperor of France, ca. 1808

Michel Ney, Duke of Elchingen, ca. 1808-9

Musée Chateau de Selliny, ca. 1809

Antonin Marie François de Beaumont, ca. 1850-1929

Coco Chanel, 1929-??

[Property of the German Government, ca. 1940-1944]

Private Collection, 1945-present

Within a fortnight, the show was set to open. On the surface, the august auction house appeared to be carrying on as usual, taking it all in stride. However, the gentleman slated to stand at the podium had been honing his remarks for days, to make them as satin-smooth as possible. For all his unflappable professionalism, he was concerned more than a

little to preserve savoir faire, for he had never before intoned: "And now, here it is, ladies and gentlemen, Lot No. 13: *His Majesty on Horse*, painted around 1560, by the Spanish Baroque master, Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velásquez. May we begin today's bidding, please, at fifty-five million pounds."

It might have gone swimmingly in the auction house's gilt and damask-walled main showroom: "Thank you, to the gentleman on my right. Do I hear eighty-three million?" – and so forth, with No. 13 easily surpassing Van Gogh's *Irises* to set a new record.

But it never made it to the block, because the wired world moves much too fast. Art Watch Security had noticed another auction in Melbourne. They, too, were selling a painting titled *His Majesty on Horse*, and it was not the painting that 'Anna Noailles' had purchased from Veronica Cardui.

Inspector H.C. Ehrman, at Interpol in Basel, was a hardened skeptic, but this one coincidence was enough for him to entertain a passing thought that forgers, too, partook of Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere; or, more likely, ideas were simply in the air. Whatever the case, his overworked staff thought they knew something of the origin of at least one of the paintings. They had been sharing data with Stockholm, London, New York, Antwerp, San Francisco and Salt Lake City. For over a month, they had been following leads.

As to the painting in Melbourne? Interpol in Basel was hurriedly confirming new information that, unlike Lot No. 13 in London, the painting in Melbourne had been carbon-dated. Of itself, carbon dating was not conclusive; however, pending results from other tests, it appeared that the painting was the real deal. It happened this way:

The Velásquez on offer in Melbourne was discovered during restoration of the Chateau de Clavary. An unsigned handwritten letter accompanied the painting, which had been rolled and hidden in a wall of the Chateau. The letter placed the painting in North Carolina. Authorities in Madrid and Paris were disputatious, to say the least, because the auction in Melbourne was maintaining that Russell Greeley, or his lover, the Marquis de Gouy d'Arsy, had purchased the painting from a family in Raleigh. That, countered the authorities in Madrid and Paris, was an impossibility.

Meanwhile, the shop at No 3 Am Lindenberg had been sealed by police. Hans and Pieter Narren were in custody and under interrogation. At the same time, Alex Kumor Ambrose was speaking with Dr. Bilderberg's attorney, firming up his story. Morrow had deceived him. And Morrow himself? When he came around the corner of Utengasse, after celebrating with the girls in Clara Platz, he saw two police enter No. 3, and he bolted. He jumped the wall of an orphanage across the street and was gone.

Meanwhile, in New York, readers of *Vanity Fair* were preparing for chaos. In fact, so was nearly everyone in the wired world, by spending \$600 billion to shield themselves from electronic doomsday, now only weeks away.

Sounding like Picasso (or the CIA's Y2K Office), *Vanity Fair* had set the tone in January by remarking "the folly, greed and denial that have muffled two decades of warnings from technology experts, and the ominous results of Y2K tests, that lay bare the dimensions of a ticking global time bomb." Tick, tick, tick.

It was not all bad. Because those unable to cope with the specter of Y2K availed themselves of 24-hour crisis lines, Josh and Veronica were able to find temporary day jobs, while they mailed out their CVs and outlined a cultural history of the Art Guerillas.

What happened to their painting? Just as the National Geographic Society held a press conference to announce the fossil of *Archaeoraptor*, Veronica enjoyed anonymous success. With Josh's connections, her *Marriage at Cana* was announced by experts to be a genuine Van Meegeren forgery.

That was enough. Veronica could not stop smiling.  
It was better than winning the Putney.

### 30.

“It’s the Renaissance works of art faked in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that are dangerous. These are nearly impossible to detect.”

– Thomas Hoving, *False Impressions*

"I can looke a whole day with delight upon a handsome picture,  
though it be but of an horse."

– Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*

---

In its November issue, the staid International Journal of Antiques & Art posed the playful question: *Is Velásquez's 'Horse' a P(h)ony from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century?*

There were many questions about the painting in Melbourne, first of which was how it had made its way to Australia from the Chateau de Clavary. The suspicion was that the painting had been stolen to order.

Even after the painting had been examined with infrared micro-spectroscopy, x-ray diffraction, x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, and x-ray fluorescence, no one could believe it was the genuine article.

Had Velásquez painted *His Majesty on Horse* in a fit of pique? Did he paint it because he was angrily impatient or utterly discouraged of ever being lifted to knighthood?

Already, graduate theses were being formulated, post-doctorates were applying for research grants, and trade publications were apprising readers.

Unsurprisingly, few had seen the actual painting. The auction house in Melbourne voluntarily cancelled the projected date of sale, as evidence accumulated that the version of *His Majesty on Horse* they were shifting was indeed from the hand of the Spanish master. There was, after all, no need to hurry. It could only increase in value, as everyone waited and watched. Besides, the lesser known auction house in Australia had been approached by the renowned auction house, Crispin-Southy. Negotiations had begun in earnest.

Naturally, Maxim's of Melbourne was on its toes. Staff knew clients and potential clientele. They knew the tastes of old money circles as well as the whims of the nouveau rich. It was their daily task to track Australia's Top 500, to stay abreast of engagements, weddings and divorces, to follow acquisitions and liquidations of property, and to monitor any insolvency that might trigger a forced sale, especially of a corporate collection.

Naturally, these desirables were targeted, and there was an A-List and a B-List. The A-List was for those with prestige, the other list was for those who sought it. Maxim's handled both lists deferentially, but differently.

Carefully worded letters were addressed to bankrupts, rich divorcées, and recent widows – not to forget professionals such as lawyers, accountants, and middle managers. These networking types always turned out for catered wine and cheese. They saw auctions as futures markets, tended to bid conservatively on the work of recently deceased artists, and paid by personal check. They were the B-List. By contrast, gilded invitations inserted with sheer onionskin were extended to those on the A-List; that is, to the members of The Rich 200, who, on the whole, preferred that their money do the talking. They were the right sort. They had no need of networking and little desire to rub elbows, so they seldom attended Maxim's glitzy previews. Instead, they perused illustrated catalogues, sober prospectuses, newsletters, and brochures. If a question presented itself, they arranged a private viewing and, come the day of the auction, they sent gray men to place their bids by secure telephone.

Deferential, but different. The approach was practical and effective, argued the Australians. Yes, allowed the highbrow Londoners, in some circumstances such an approach would be understandable. However, the discovery of a lost Velásquez was an extraordinary event. Modification of normal business practice was warranted. There was no point, for example, in toying with the B-List. Invitations should be extended only to the crème de la crème.

Too right, agreed the Australians, who were fast studies. They well understood that this single transaction, this historically significant offering, had potential to assure the company's credibility in a global art market.

Negotiations, then preparations. Above all, there was a complication, and it was easy to suppose that sensibilities might be offended. Perceptions, then, would have to be managed. And the means to do that could only be careful and authoritative explication.

In a nutshell, the immediate complication was how best to present the new find and still maintain a sense of decorum. How were the auctioneers to proceed, given its subject? And what could – should – one say about it? Usually, equestrian portraits generate little interest; but, thanks to a leaked story in a popular tabloid, rumors were flying. For this reason, the auction houses sought advice from a panel of the usual experts: an historian, a museologist, a psychologist and an advertising executive.

No wonder they needed advice. *His Majesty on Horse* was a satirical painting. It portrayed the King of Spain, quirt in hand, riding wildly upon the back of a palace dwarf.

Scholars at Oxford and Cambridge passed without comment, but the Australian National University suggested that the model was Francisco Lezcano, whom Velásquez had famously painted in the open air. Later opinion, from Oxbridge, demonstrated that the Spanish monarch was mounted, not upon Francisco, but upon a near-twin cousin, Mateo, who went by the nickname of 'Horse'.

On the day of the auction, Crispin-Southy of London, in association with Maxim's of Melbourne, released a catalogue with the following revised entry:

**Diego Velázquez (1599–1660)**

*His Majesty On Horse* (B. 342)

Description: Equestrian portrait

Materials: oil on linen

Dimensions: 87cm x 71cm

Acquisition: Bequeathed

Reference: A.1999.GR.2005

Provenance:

Collection of the Artist

Napoléon I, Emperor of France, ca. 1808

Michel Ney, Duke of Elchingen, ca. 1808-9

Napoléon-Joseph Ney, Prince of Moscow, ca. 1815 (?)

(In North-South Carolina?)

Russell Greeley (?)

Marquis de Gouy d'Arsy (?)

Anon. sale, Crispin-Southy, 28 November 1999, No. 7

Questions in the operative period. Where was this painting between 1809-1999?

To answer its own rhetorical question, the catalogue supplied dates in parentheses and two short essays. The longer of the two essays discussed the handwritten letter that had been discovered along with the painting, tentatively identifying it as having been written by the Marquis de Gouy d'Arsy. The second essay, far the more 'curiouser', was believed to have been composed by a professor at the Australian National University whose name went unpublished. That short exposition, entitled *The Marshal Ney Legend*, follows:

*There is a legend about Marshal Michel Ney that appeared sometime after his execution by firing squad. The story goes that because Ney had Masonic ties, as did the Duke of Wellington, the execution was faked. Marshal Ney was fitted with packets of blood, and the firing squad shot blanks. Wellington arranged for Ney to be smuggled to the United States, where he lived as a teacher.*

*This conjecture brings us to a fellow named Peter Stuart Ney, who taught school in North and South Carolina. This man Ney died in 1846. His final words were spoken in French, and they are reported to have been: "Bessières is dead. The Old Guard is gone. Now, please, let me die."*

*Peter Ney was interred at Third Creek Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, North Carolina. His headstone reads: "Soldier of the Revolution under Bonaparte."*

*Whether Marshal Ney died by bullet or from old age, he was survived by a son of some distinction, Napoléon-Joseph Ney (1803-1857), Prince of Moscow and President of the Jockey Club. He was an art lover, some say.*



**- FIN -**

**Spanish to My Horse**

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

2005 / 2010 / 2012

James Gardner

**Special Thanks**

The author wishes to thank J. Burgin, C. Munford, and R. Lair for their patience and sharp-eyed assistance in proof reading various drafts of this text. Besides providing help in correcting typos, spelling, punctuation, and mental lapses on my part, they offered advice on readability while managing to sort intentional errors from unintentional errors.

## *Appendix*

[Veronica Cardui received this list from Josh Melrose]

BBC News | Art fraudster jailed

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/newsid\\_279000/279937.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/newsid_279000/279937.stm)

NY Times | A 20th-Century Master Scam

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/19990718mag-art-forger.html>

Sydney Morning Herald | A brush with fame

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/9807/18/features/features2.html>

David Duez, « Pour en finir avec une rumeur :

du nouveau sur le scandale de *l'Âge d'or* », 1895, n°32, Varia, 2000, [En ligne], mis en ligne le 28 novembre 2007.

<http://1895.revues.org/document119.html>

<http://www.museum-security.org/>

Louis M. Salerno, *The New Normal: A Review of the Major December American Art Auctions* (apparently no longer available on-line).

Have a look at these, too –

Sophy Burnham, *The Art Crowd* (Random House, 1973)

Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult* (Mandrake of Oxford, 1991)

Paul Crenshaw, *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy* (Cambridge University Press, 1656)

John Drewe, *The Gentle Art of Documentation* (Plantard-Sion, 2010)

Laurence Benaïm, *La vicomtesse du bizarre* (Bernard Grasset, 2001)

\*\*\*\*\*

## Errata, etc.

**Editor's Note:** Readers will have noticed that there are exactly twelve errors of fact in the text, as set forth below. Additional errors should be ascribed to, as Gide best expressed it, 'le parti de dieu'.

Item: In chapter five, Morrow is sipping latte, then pastis. In filmmaking, this would be an error in continuity. In *Spanish to My Horse*, it is a tip-off to the careful reader.

Item: Arthur Danto's essay was published in 1984.

Item: Dalí was excommunicated from Breton's surrealist group, but not for the reasons given by Anna Noailles.

Item: There is no street named "Mühletorgässlein" in Basel and no *Chez Prunella*.

Item: At the time of this writing, there is no McDonald's in Kathmandu.

Item: There was an antique shop at No 3 Am Lindenberg, only during the 1970s. The tree on the sidewalk is long gone, and the front of the shop divides roughly at an interior angle of 140 degrees: window-door/window-door.

Item: The *Café Voltaire* is in Santa Monica, while the *Cabaret Voltaire* was in Zurich.

Item: *The Thomas Crown Affair* was released in the autumn of 1999. Also, Josh and Veronica saw *Eyes Wide Shut* before its release.

Item: Josh's hideaway is the address of the forger's studio in *Incognito* (1997).

Item: In the summer of 1999, no one in Colorado, rebellious artists included, would have considered staging a surrealist shooting spree three months after Columbine High School. The film *Elephant*, by Gus van Sant, is based upon that real shooting spree.

Item: The museum closest to Golden Gate Park is the De Young, located within the park itself.

Item: There is no painting by Vermeer entitled *Marriage At Cana*, nor is there such a one by Han van Meegeren.

Item: The Stuckists formed in 1999 and released their first manifesto in the autumn, when Tracey Emin's *Unmade Bed* was short-sheeted for the Turner Prize.

Item: Depending upon the source, financing for *Un Chien Andalou* came either from Luis Buñuel's mother or from his grandmother.

Item: The aristocratic high bohemian Louise de Vilmorin wrote *Madame de* and *Les amants* and lived with André Malraux, who, before becoming Minister of Culture, was an editor of limited edition books, including the Marquis de Sade's *Les amis de crime*, and *Le bordel de venise*. Before her relationship with Malraux, de Vilmorin had been engaged to the novelist and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, contributor to the surrealist journal, *Le Minotaure*. Vilmorin's letters to Jean Cocteau were published posthumously.

N.B. In actuality, Diego Velázquez's *His Majesty On Horse* has never been recovered.

\*\*\*\*\*